

## Shrouded in Light and Darkness (5th Arc)

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# Shrouded in Light and Darkness (5th Arc)

by [hunnyB](#)

## Summary

“Since the secret is out, let’s skip to the interesting part.” Wei Qing added with that pretentious and stern tone of hers, the usual annoyed look set in place. “You two say nothing to no one and disappear for two weeks only to come back with blood-covered clothes and evident signs of a severe backlash in your meridians and body. Please explain me how.”

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Through Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian finds the courage to embark on a new path, one which forecasts lots of talking and hard figuring-out to do, but also less solitude and heartbreak. It showcases right away the beneficial effects it has on him, allowing him to show his face in public again, but it doesn't spare either from Wei Ying getting into trouble.

## Notes

"With no drop of remorse and as little of a warning to their respective brothers of their departure, destination and mission, Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian disappeared from public eye. The only evidence implying the intentional nature of their unadvised take-off (because yes, Jiang Cheng actually thought for a moment someone had kidnapped his brother to hurt him, because who wouldn't? He would surely like to slap some sense into him if he had the chance) was the piece of paper retrieved in Clan Leader Jiang's room, citing a few words in black ink and a smiling face."

# Chapter 1

With no drop of remorse and as little of a warning to their respective brothers of their departure, destination and mission, Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian disappeared from public eye. The only evidence implying the intentional nature of their unadvised take-off (because yes, Jiang Cheng actually thought for a moment someone had kidnapped his brother to hurt him, because *who wouldn't*? He would surely like to slap some sense into him if he had the chance) was the piece of paper retrieved in Clan Leader Jiang's room, citing a few words in black ink and a smiling face.

*'I'm with Lan Zhan. Be back soon :).'*

The 'soon' was - from those involved in the matter and thus allowed access to the note - interpreted as a few days of absence or nothingness until the two would either return home or send a letter to fill them in whatever they disappeared to, but both predictions were entirely astray.

Two weeks passed before anyone heard of them.

Jiang Cheng was growing more furious by the day and ultimately stated his intention to break Wei Wuxian's legs as soon as he returned home, but this happened when and how he least expected it too.

That afternoon, after dealing with Clan's reports the whole morning, his family had reunited in the main hall like every other day to share dinner when the door of his room was *almost* slammed open, and a unevenly breathing disciple rushed in with wide eyes, alerting every occupant of the room.

"You lowly rat! Who taught you manners!?" Yu Ziyuan snarled, furious of witnessing such discourtesy in her home.

The man was shaking from head to toe and dropped to the ground, bowing deeply and uttering loud apologizes, though still shaken. "F-Forgive me Madam Yu, but... Clan Leader Jiang, there is a matter of utmost urgency!"

"Which is?" he replied, annoyed but on alert.

The disciple rose up, lifting his head to speak. "Young Master Wei and Young Master Lan are back!"

The news brought mixed feelings inside the room, from relief to anger. Yanli was the first to jump to her feet when it reached her, eyes already glazed with tears as she interrogated the disciple with her worried look. "Where is A'Xian!?"

“H-He... He has been taken to Healer Qing.”

His words, even so spoken with a shattered voice, froze every occupant of the room, their underlining implication palpable regardless of the shortness of his explanation, his sole tone enough to cause worry. Jiang Cheng’s eyes were particularly round, his nails drawing blood from his clenched fists. “Wha—What are his conditions?”

“I am not sure, Clan Leader.” the boy hurriedly answered. “Young Master Lan was carrying him on his back, but he did not stop once and went straight for Healer Qing. I think... I think he was in a rush.”

“A’Xian...” Yanli murmured, stalling for a moment of shock before drying her tears and stepping closer with hurried steps. “How was he!? Was he... Was he injured?”

The Jiang disciple looked pitiful. “His clothes were stained in blood, but—”

After a curt warning to their parents, neither Jiang Cheng nor Yanli listened to another word before they sprinted off, instantly catching the implication behind the reason he was brought to their most trusted and capable healer— Jiang Fengmian close in tow.

“Wei Qing!” Jiang Cheng screamed as soon as he entered the room the elders had pointed him to when he and his sister had asked for Wei Wuxian.

“What are you screaming for!?” came the woman’s harsh answer from her standing spot. Only Wei Qing would have the guts to raise her voice before a Clan Leader.

Their eyes led them instantly to the bundle of black and red atop the mattress, Lan Wangji hovering close, closer than they would have expected, and they quickly noted that Wei Wuxian was awake, weary eyes fixed on the two of them when a smile stretched across his lips. The two of them felt something absolutely amiss, witnessing with a tug at their heart their brother’s tranquil expression in place instead of whatever deadly state they had pictured.

“Jiang Cheng, Shijie.” he nodded curtly with a lighter tone, but the action still caused pain to rush in his head and draw a wince for him. Lan Wangji was instantly alerted by it, placing his larger hand on top of Wei Wuxian’s and asking if it hurt.

Yanli and Jiang Cheng were at a loss for words, but after the initial shock, the older had been too scared for her brother to indulge in such frivolous questions now. She approached him and sat at the end of the bed once Lan Wangji lent her his spot, allowing her to fuss over her little brother.

“A’Xian, how are you? Are you injured?” she asked hurriedly, worried over her brother but still cautious to give him time to explain. Whereas Jiang Cheng was never known for his patience.

“Where have you been *you idiot*?” he snarled, furious, lowering his voice when he saw him wince in pain and clutch at his hand again.

“Jiang Cheng, what are you shouting for?” he scoffed quietly, sinking back against the pillow when his head started buzzing again, tired and drained but safe. “I’m fine. Most of the blood you see has already dried, we just had nothing to change onto. Right, Lan Zhan?”

Lan Wangji’s face held no response outside concern: despite Wei Wuxian’s insistence he was fine, he had been, after all, present when the resentment aroused by the Yin Tiger Tally hit him with the force of tons of bricks, tearing the skin of his body and burning its muscles until it crumbled to the ground, motionless, and stayed like that for days.

So, Lan Wangji had been responsible of taking both of them home despite his own exhaustion.

Even when Wei Wuxian stirred awake and insisted he could walk, Lan Wangji said he did not trust him to make the journey back on his own in the unkind state he was in — but later on he would admit, under the younger’s merciless teasing, that it was also an excuse to prolongue their time together, for neither wanted to leave the other’s side since they confessed their feelings to one another.

But before he could say anything - whether he wanted to or had opted to stay silent - Jiang Fengmian rushed inside the room with a rushed pace, his wife following right behind him with less hurry.

“A’Xian!”

He stalled right before the occupied bed and lingered there with his son and daughter, looking just as worried. Despite his current condition and their state of concern, Wei Wuxian looked blissfully happy - as happy as he had never been in these last few years after his first disappearance.

He lifted his arms and bowed his head as much as he could when sitting. “Uncle Jiang, Madam Yu”

Jiang Fengmian was not really bothered by the improper kowtow (things he usually did not pay attention to the same manner his wife would), but meticulously checked over him before reaching out, cautious. “A’Xian, what happened to you?”

“My guess is he got caught in some illicit affairs again.” Yu Ziyuan’s affluent voice cut in, the tall woman striding over with that omnipresent, solemn look resembling a scowl. “Why are you in such a state? Has your incessant playing with resentment destroyed your cultivation bases to such a level!?”

Being at the center of everyone’s attention as he was, no one could miss the way the severe comment affected his placid spirit and the light in his eyes that flickered and diminished, his ever-lasting yet saddened smile not reaching his eyes. By now, anyone tucked inside that room but Jiang Yanli and Yu Ziyuan knew that Wei Wuxian had long lost his golden core, so anyone but them felt tense when they heard such words.

The old Wei Wuxian would have attempted to come up with a lie on the spot or embellish the moment with humor, but the Wei Wuxian of current times felt something unpleasant inside

him stir and relent.

*No more lies*, it said\*.\*

And so, clenching the hand that still held tightly onto Lan Wangji, he breathed out. “It is not that. I just... don’t have a golden core anymore.”

Amid the quietly shocked but not quite surprised looks that were thrown his way, the one he was mostly focused on was his Shijie’s, her gentle eyes rounding up and swelling. She clutched his arm and trembled, trying to keep her hushed voice as stable as possible. “A’Xian, we didn’t... W-When did it happen?”

And Wei Wuxian smiled at her, because he knew what was going on in her head right then, the same thoughts that filled his mind every day, and that only lately have stopped exhausting him. “It happened right after Lotus Pier was burned.”

“S-So long!? Oh *my*...” Yanli’s hands rushed up to cover her gaping mouth as shock took over her face, her body shuddering at the thought of her brother joining a war without means of protection. “Why did you keep it secret? A-Xian, y-you could have gotten hurt! It could have been dangerous.”

Wei Wuxian held her hand and smiled, his eyes softening the way they always would when his Shijie was in distress (particularly when he was to blame for it).

“I didn’t want to worry you, Shijie.” he confessed, and his voice grew thick, because he could feel the heavy, lingering stare of Yu Ziyuan as she stood quietly on the side, probably thinking about the time she whipped him in Qinghe and almost sent him seven feet underground without ever knowing why.

“I am fine, am I not?” he turned around and tilted his chin upward in Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji’s direction. “These two were obsessing over me, they wouldn’t let me breath for a moment.”

And Yanli felt both comforted and grateful, thanking Gusu Lan’s Second Young Master and then her younger brother, whom she was infinitely proud of. But Wei Wuxian’s words drew Jiang Cheng into the conversation, a furrow knitting his brows together.

“Wait. He knew as well?” he questioned, turning an inquisitive look toward a very silent, very still Lan Wangji.

But his brother shook his head. “Not until some days ago. I lost consciousness and was out for quite some time, so Lan Zhan had all the time to figure out that my golden core was gone.” Wei Wuxian told them, but no one missed to notice how calm and collected he sounded about the whole thing— no harsh looks, no hardness of facial features and no trace of deadness in his eyes, but the old beaming light that reflected within the silver of his irides.

Jiang Cheng still looked tense, but snorted and played along with his brother, eager to change subject so that no one would inquire for more details, like ‘how?’ he lost his golden core. (But news of Wei Wuxian falling on Wen Chao’s hands had travelled across the entire

cultivation world, so once one knew about his missing core, the ‘why’ was an easy guess, considering who often accompanied the heir of the Wen Clan.)

“Since the secret is out, let’s skip to the interesting part.” Wei Qing added with that pretentious and stern tone of hers, the usual annoyed look set in place. “You two say *nothing* to *no one* and disappear for *two weeks* only to come back with blood-covered clothes and evident signs of a severe backlash in your meridians and body. Please explain me *how*.”

“What!?”

Everyone stared at her with gaping eyes - and a hint of fear - before returning their attention toward the two directly involved.

“A backlash!?” Jiang Cheng echoed, round-eyed and furious with worry. “Wei Wuxian, you should not joke with such things! Your body can not endure—”

Jiang Cheng cut himself off, his eyes flaring with regret, baring the face of someone who spoke too much. Wei Wuxian let out a deep, tired sigh, but otherwise his silver eyes did not blur the way they would have in the past. “No need for censorship, I won’t get upset. But I’m not weak just because I don’t have a golden core anymore.” he stressed, appearing more light-hearted than he normally would. “I just need to rest, I’ll be fine!”

Still, the confusion regarding the facts that lead to such outcome was not cleared.

“But, where did you exactly wonder off to suffer a severe backlash?”

“It’s a long story... but to make it brief, me and Lan Zhan destroyed one half of the Yin Tiger Tally.” he revealed. His confession elicited a round of gasps and surprised looks, to which he responded with a dismissive shrug. “Such a thing should have never existed in the first place. Now that the war has come to an end, the other Clans will surely attempt claiming possession of it, and although I trust Clan Leader Nie to destroy the other three shards, I do not trust someone to take advantage of my discovery for some selfish want of power.”

“You made the right choice.” Jiang Fengmian nodded, still looking incredulous, but proud, for he never doubted the kindness and selfishness of Wei Wuxian's soul and heart. “But... How did the two of you destroy it? The Yin Tiger Tally is made of Yin Metal, and I remember how difficult and energy-wasting it was to destroy those four shards.”

He couldn't help but be curious, since he and his son had taken part in the discussion of said matter, where the most powerful weapons, cultivators and tools were used to prevent the severe backlash, before Clan Leader Nie took care of what remained of the three shards, sealing it away.

“We looked for a large, empty space where strong waves of resentful energy wouldn’t cause harm, and I needed an energy that opposed and balanced mine, so I asked Lan Zhan. As you know, it is no easy accomplishment to destroy something made of Yin Metal. When I lost consciousness, Lan Zhan had to take care of cleansing the thing before we could get rid of it.”

Jiang Fengmian furrowed his brows. "Where to?"

But Wei Wuxian wasn't yielding. "Somewhere safe, a place that only me and Lan Zhan know about."

Lan Wangji nodded, and his confirmation was, it seemed, enough of a guarantee for everyone else. Before long, Wen Qing's brows furrowed, a doubt creeping up her mind. "You said you only destroyed 'half' of it."

"Seeing how energy-consuming it was to destroy just one out of two, Lan Zhan forced me to temporarily seal away the other half, somewhere no one but me can access," he confessed. The more he spoke, so freely and trusting, the more surprised they felt: he had never been so open and genuine about anything concerning him or his newly developed cultivation, be it his flute or other tools. Months of secrets shut behind closed doors and little explanations offered about what he did only fueled the mistrust and diffidence people felt toward him, making his words hard to trust.

And yet, now here he was.

Wei Wuxian probably noticed the insecurity and skepticism in their faces and calmly added. "The Yin Tiger Tally served its purpose to defeat Wen Ruohan, and although I think some Clans will use every means and torture to get it, I won't use it ever again." only *then* - as though vivid pictures crossed his mind for a brief moment - did his eyes sharpen. "It is too dangerous."

Most of them knew now what he was hinting at, what scared him so much about using or keeping that tool, the solid proof of his mistakes and loss.

"Still, before going off somewhere playing the hero *again*, couldn't you have warned us!?" Jiang Cheng demanded, raising his voice. "We have been searching for you two for the past two weeks with nothing but a stupid note!"

Tensing once more on bed, Wei Wuxian's eyes widened, tracking their way back to Lan Wangji. "Is that true? Has it really been two weeks?"

Facing him, Lan Wangji nodded. "You have been unconscious for five days."

Wei Wuxian sucked in a sharp breath before he addressed Lan Wangji again. "Aiyo Lan Zhan. Couldn't you have warned me sooner!?"

And then, something entirely unexpected happened. Lan Wangji apologized.

"...Sorry."

Before anyone could add another word or say 'what the fuck' out loud (mostly Jiang Cheng), they heard a screaming, screeching voice from outside, and soon enough, two other figures stepped inside Wei Wuxian's own room, catching the utmost attention.

"I'm sorry, h-he would not stop crying." Wei Ning apologized upon entering, looking extremely unnerved beneath all that attention and pointed eyes; he did not step too close and



only greeted Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian from afar.

Quite contrary to his cousin's quiet behaviour, as soon as Wei Yuan set eyes on the person he was looking for, he wailed to be put down. Once his feet touched the ground, he rushed toward the bed, climbing up with little struggles until he settled himself on Wei Wuxian's lap and broke down, whimpering against his dark, stained robes.

"A'Yuan, what are you crying for?" the boy chuckled, caressing the child's tiny back for comfort despite his own pain and the slight tremor of his hand.

The child sniffed, lifting his head and peering up with trembling lashes. "X-Xian-gege is *hurt*."

"What are you talking about? I am not hurt, I'm just veeeery tired." he insisted, voice lowering with a childish tone. "Didn't granny teach you what people do when they are tired?"

Wei Yuan sniffed once more, looking thoughtful for a moment before he seemingly understood what he was hinting. "They sleep?" he added with his adorable, wavering voice, and Wei Wuxian nodded, caressing his head.

"Exactly! Now, go back to your Ning-gege until I come get you myself, okay?"

But the child wouldn't hear it, strongly shaking his head in deny. "I want to stay with Xian-gege!"

His lips formed a pout. "But I'm all dirty..."

And yet, he shouldn't have underestimated how stubborn he was (he took this after him, maybe).

"A'Yuan doesn't care!"

Wei Wuxian's eyes narrowed in on him, testing his resolution, but seeing the serious look on the adorable face of a child made him break out into a pang of laughter. "Fine fine, don't make that face. You can stay if you promise to be good."

The child rejoiced and happily laid down on bed next to him, leaning against his Xian-gege's chest and carefully eyeing the other people in the room.

"Wei Ying, is this...?" Lan Wangji caught his attention, golden eyes fixed on the pouty, tear-strained face peering from Wei Wuxian's chest.

Just like that, he realized that the two of them have never met in this lifetime. His eyes softened as he hurried to make presentations, feeling his heart refreshen.

"Lan Zhan, this is Wei Yuan, one of the Wen— Wei that lives here in Yunmeng." he declared, and none of the present missed the way his eyes shone as he introduced the two. "A'Yuan, this is Lan Wangji, the boy from Gusu I was telling you about."

“Ah!” the child squeaked, sounding excited as he climbed closer to Wei Wuxian, looking over at him. “Is he your friend?”

“Ah. He...” *was not his friend*, that’s for sure, though they had yet to define their relationship after what transpired in Lanling. It made him consider that none of the present knew of such development quite yet, but it also brought to mind that until this very moment the two of them had behaved in such a manner that no one would find their closeness an unusual thing.

Wasn’t it expected of them to develop feelings for one another after what they have been through? Maybe not, still, that’s what he thought.

Shameless and untamed as he was, he made for both the decision to overlook these trivial matters, for he did not wish to live a moment more among past regrets and ‘what if’s. In the end, it was with a wide, bright grin that he spoke out loud those few words which thrummed to life inside his heart for his dearest people and family to hear.

“You see, A’Yuan, Lan Wangji is Xian-gege’s future husband!”

The reaction of the child was minimized, nothing compared to the loud squeaky noises and gasps that filled the room. A’Yuan’s thoughtful, innocent face peering up from his chest with curiosity shining in his eyes was the cutest sight he has ever laid eyes on, but—the violent blush covering Lan Wangji’s jade-like cheeks was ever cuter.

“Future husband?” echoed the high-pitched, squeaky voice. Wei Wuxian nodded, but before he could even attempt to explain this difficult concept to a child, he was violently cut out by more voices.

“A-Are you joking?” Jiang Cheng ushered, gaping eyes fixed on his as he shook his head. They all looked at Lan Wangji, as if expecting this to be a joke, Wei Wuxian’s new-found way - beyond bold and shameless - to tease poor Young Master Lan, but the latter looked anything but contrary, though slightly embarrassed.

*Embarrassed! Him! Hanguang-jun!*

“A’Xian, what does that— when did you—?” Jiang Fengmian looked completely traumatized, and Wei Wuxian might have let out a chuckle or two if he didn’t find it disrespectful. Madam Yu’s face was unreadable, and he decided to linger on the surprise her face held rather than anything else. Jiang Cheng and Yanli were another thing entirely, baring too many emotions he could not crack at once with just one glance.

In the meantime, Lan Wangji stood quiet, face shaking with embarrassment.

“Perhaps it wasn’t the best way to announce it.” he chuckled with a light scoff, but he looked so light-hearted and worry-free, happy, and this sight was enough to draw the surprise and shock out of Yanli’s face. Instead, she pushed forward and reached out to clap both hands into her own smaller ones, smiling brightly at her younger brother.

“A’Xian, for how long have you two been together?” she asked, her sweetness and affection drawing a smile out of a slightly nervous Wei Wuxian.

“Well, it’s not really *official* or anything, but... We kind of figured each other out two weeks ago, at the haunt.” he declared, and Jiang Cheng suddenly put two and two together. So *that explains why* those two had behaved so weirdly that day.

Wei Wuxian paused for a moment, looking carefully at his sister. “Shijie, are you... are you okay with it?”

And Yanli understood the underlining meaning of his cautiousness and words, observing the mild frown which wrinkled the skin between his eyebrows, but she shook her head harshly and stretched her smile even wider, looking honestly enthusiast.

“A’Xian, how could I *not* be? It doesn’t matter who you like, as long as you are happy with them.” she declared, squeezing his hands in a quiet gesture of comfort. “And just now, I could see how happy you are with Hanguang-jun. It makes me incredibly glad to see you smile like this again.”

But even when she said this, her smile, which up until then had been nothing but earnestly joyful and relieved, began to twist under a more dense and consistent load of conflicted emotions, a sudden sorrow that flickered behind amber eyes. She could not help the invading thoughts of her little brother drifting away from her, body too thin and light for someone of his age and face too pale and sunken.

“...Shijie.”

She did not notice the tears that began to stream down her face until Wei Wuxian reached out to wipe them for her, her heart quivering as months of unspoken words and pent up emotions finally resurfaced, shadows that could now face the sun and vanish at once.

“Shijie, why are you crying?”

“I’m sorry.” she quickly cleaned up her face, smiling grateful when Lan Wangji caught on and turned around to offer her some privacy. She drew in a deep breath, cupped his brother’s hand and held it close again. “I just— I’m just *so* relieved to see you be so happy and cheerful again, A’Xian. It—” her breath itched but she tried to clear her throat to continue. “The-These past few months, it felt like you were drifting further and further away, and I... I could do *nothing*—”

Wei Wuxian was like struck by lightening, awareness clouding his senses for a moment before the smile on his lips quivered as he embraced his sister, gentle but firm under Yu Ziyuan’s sharp eyes.

“I’m sorry, Shijie. I did not want to worry you. I just—” *how could I ever smile or seek happiness after you died for me? After causing the death of your husband and orphaning Jin Ling?* He shoved his face in the crook of her neck, ignoring the fact that Yu Ziyuan was there and was very contrary to such close proximity between the two of them.

But, honestly, *he couldn’t care less.*

He felt like his heart had just surfaced from the depths of the ocean to take in a large intake of breath, his brain functioning again now that he had introduced oxygen inside his system. Because Yanli had patiently waited this entire time for him to accept the hand she had long outstretched, watching him balance his life between life and death, close to letting go yet bound to earth by relationships and responsibilities.

“A’Xian, I wish nothing but for you to live your life fully and be happy.” she declared, and Wei Wuxian’s heart ached, for they shared the same wish (he just wanted to help Yanli marry the one she loved and start a family without no danger heaving behind her back).

And that’s exactly what he told her. “It’s the same for me, Shijie. If that is what you wish, I want to see you marry and be happy.”

Yanli’s eyes swelled with tears, happiness flooding across her face.

“Xian-gege, are you getting married?”

The moment was high with tender feelings, but Wei Yuan was yet too innocent to understand what had just happened. He was confused about something and asked his Xian-gege to clarify it up for him.

“Not right now, A’Yuan. But soon. In a few years, perhaps.” he said, searching Wangji with his eyes, with a bit of a find, shy look. “What do you say, Lan Zhan?”

Lan Wangji was bashfully embarrassed, but nodded.

“Then, we will wait until Shijie marries and do things properly!” he exclaimed, looking at her with shimmering eyes. Wei Yuan nodded, but his happiness was cut off by a long, heavy yawn, his body shifting so that he could lay his head on Wei Wuxian’s thigh and curl his body between his legs.

“It seems that A’Yuan is sleepy.” Yanli chuckled, watching with a tender expression as Wei Wuxian cradled the child closer and covered him with his sheet, the child nestling against the warmth of his skin and falling asleep quite easily.

“We should leave them be, then.” Jiang Fengmian said softly before awkwardly turning toward the other one that still occupied Wei Ying’s bed. “Young Master Lan, I will write a letter for your brother and uncle and let them know you are here.”

His voice was strained by a feeling he could not quite identify, but Lan Wangji still bowed in thanks, grateful. “I will instantly arrange a room for you.” he added then, and something changed in Lan Wangji’s usually natural look, something that softened his expression but not in a utterly positive way.

Having by now learnt to read him the best, Wei Wuxian watched his face thoroughly before he cut in. “There’s no need for another room, Uncle Jiang.”

“What? Why?”

And when he tried to explain his mind, he paused, realising that he could not voice those words out loud without bringing about misunderstandings - those were actually not so far from the truth. A little blush of frustration crept up his face as he turned out to be at a loss for words.

Jiang Cheng and Yanli were shell-shocked, diverting their eyes as they quickly caught on, but so did their father, who spoke with round eyes and a look of disbelief. “A’Xian, you—”

“They decided to get married anyway, just let them be.” Yu Ziyuan icily shrugged, eyes sharp and voice loud as she turned around, finally exiting the room where Wei Yuan had already dozed off in. The fact that she had expressed neither disgust nor disapproval was nice — though she always denied herself as his mother figure, so he really needn’t her approval.

Feeling like he still had something to clarify, Wei Wuxian’s nervousness teared more words out of his lips. “A’Yuan is sleeping here too, Uncle Jiang! The two of them can just look over me for safe measure!”

“Fine, we... will speak tomorrow once you have rested.” he nodded off, gaze drifting between the two of them before he cleared his voice and turned around, rushing out of the room for a change of air. Jiang Cheng and Yanli quickly said him goodbye before the room went quiet, and Wei Wuxian broke into a liberatory laughter.

“Oh my—” he chuckled brokenly, eyeing Lan Wangji as he covered his body with the grey sheet of the bed. “Did you see Jiang Cheng’s face?!”

“Wei Ying...” Lan Zhan cut in, his ears still red, face caught red between embarrassment and fear. “Do not make noises, the child is asleep.”

Even when he was urged to ush, Wei Wuxian couldn’t help but play around and tease him.

“Lan Zhan, if you are going to stay here, at least get comfortable.” he added with a flirtuous tone and a come-hither gaze, patting the other side of his bed. After a moment of hesitation, Wangji nodded and they maneuvered around until Wei Wuxian stood at the center with Wei Yuan resting protected between him and the wall. Still, Lan Wangji occupied the opposite edge of the bed without seeming to care about Wei Wuxian’s state of dirt and filth, but still laid down too far for his liking.

“My my, don’t be so shy...” he shifted closer and spread his fingers across his peck, leaving a sweet kiss on his lips that earned a barely audible noise from his parted mouth. “Earlier you barely spoke a word and let me do all the work. Is this how an husband treats his future wife!?”

“W-Wife?”

Lan Wangji’s eyes rounded, something dark and wanton shimmering across liquid amber, and though the sight teared a grin out of Wei Wuxian’s lips, the boy was still decent enough to remember that there was a toddler sleeping next to him, in the same bed and room as them.

“A’Yuan is here.” he whispered, and yet, he moved closer until he was breathing right against Lan Wangji’s ear, making the older draw a stuttering breath. Lan Wangji was holding back, shaking with the force of his resolution and of Wei Wuxian’s deliberate teasing.

“Wei Ying...” he called warningly.

“He is sleeping right here, Er-gege. But I’m pretty sure that if he hadn’t been—”

Lan Zhan sealed his mouth shut with his lips and Wei Wuxian’s body went pliant against the mattress, shaking with the force and insistence of the kiss.

“L-Lan Zhan—” he called breathlessly, but his words were cut when Lan Wangji pressed forward again, sealing his lips over and over again whenever he tried to speak. At the end of their make-out session, he was panting, clinging to his robes while he tried to even his ragged breathing. “S-Spare me, mighty Hanguang-Jun...”

“Then, be quiet.” he answered, and lowered to suck and nibble at the skin of his neck, until the first bite sent a pleasurable spark across Wei Wuxian’s back.

“E-Er-gege, aren’t *you* the shameless one now!?” he insisted, ushering quietly as to not wake up the little kid next to them, whom he eyed closely after. “W-What if we wake up Wei Yuan? What if he sees us like this!?”

Finally, Lan Wangji paused.

He retreated, but admired his fresh work for a long moment, from Wei Wuxian’s dishevelled hair, to the frantic puffs of air which slipped out of his lips, to the harsh rise and fall of his chest and the translucent trail of spit peppered with kisses and bite marks, peeking out of his soft robes.

It wasn't only the wanton feeling urging him to take action, but also the frenetic heartbeat in his chest, one that urged him to claim the boy who carelessly announced their future marriage to his adoptive family and looked so enthusiastic about it, where not even three weeks prior he was constantly tired, barely eating, always with a bad temper. One that urged him to make him feel loved, cherished, treasured. One that had waited for too long.

With his heart hammering in his chest and his eyes lusting for the appealing sight, a tight pinch to his arm drew him to reality.

“H-Hanguang-Jun, Er-gege, I’m tired. Why don’t we just go to bed, with A’Yuan?” he still tried, eyes darting back and forth, very much awake. Obviously reacting to his pleas, Wangji lowered his hips until his groin rubbed against Wei Wuxian’s own, eliciting a loud gasp from both, followed by an appalled look of those silver eyes.

“L-Lan Zhan! Are you serious right now!? Have you drunk anything!? What has gotten into —”

But Lan Wangji was not having it. He grasped his thighs and hoisted his half-naked body in his arms, watching him cling to him while he walked them to the adjacent room and closed

the doors shut, drawing a talisman over the screen and creating a transparent, but physical barrier of sort.

Wei Wuxian was open-mouthed, *astounded*.

“H-Hanguang-jun, you will have to take responsibility if—”

Rude, grinning lips quickly sealed his mouth shut again.

“...Will do.”

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

"Wei Wuxian opened his mouth drowsily before he hesitated, and he seemed to realize something by the way his eyes suddenly sprung open, his body jolting up from the bed and startling the poor kid in his arms. Lan Wangji had a sour look on his face, but the pink on his lobes was enough to have him figure it all out."

The gloomy dullness of the night had long settled below the horizon and left place to the raising sun of a new day, casting a bright, matt afterglow upon a Lotus Pier still shrouded in a hazy silence. After the first two hours of light, Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng walked to their brother's quarters and knocked at his closed door while dutifully carrying the food meant for him and their guests.

Knowing their brother the best, they fully expected Wei Wuxian to be asleep at this hour of the day, but it was still surprising - if not startling - to have the infamous Lan Wangji answer their call and open the room for them, white robes all put together and hair as straight as always, face absent of any trace of slumber.

Against all odds, even as esteemed guest of Yunmeng Jiang and close to the sleepy-head that was Wei Ying, Lan Wangji had not lost the habit to wake up at 5 am in the morning and abided by Gusu Lan's strict schedule. They didn't know (of course they *couldn't*, else Wei Wuxian would die in shame and Lan Wangji in embarrassment) that he fell asleep much later that night and heavily exceeded 9 pm, for his clothes hid away the lasting scars of yesterday's intense... *activity*. Still, he was awake and up earlier than anyone in Yunmeng, especially compared to his mate Wei Wuxian, whom was still struggling to rise from bed.

Yanli's face flushed at his appearance, the young woman visibly flustered with the idea of this man sleeping *next* to his brother— for she could not suspect how the wild, untamed nature of Wei Wuxian already brought the Lan disciple over every existing limit of decorum. "Young Master Lan, forgive our intrusion, we have brought you food."

Beside her, Jiang Cheng scoffed heavily, murmuring with a grouchy tone how theirs could not be counted as an intrusion since they were visiting their brother in his room, but his complain was, although politely, dismissed.

Lan Wangji bowed thankfully and quickly stepped aside to let them in.

While Jiang Cheng put down the tray of food carrying their breakfast, Yanli strode over the bed. Her heart picked up as she took fondly in the sight of Wei Wuxian still laying asleep on his side with Wei Yuan tucked between his arms, both wearing the most innocuous expressions Yanli has ever seen.



“A’Cheng...” she murmured below her breath as to not wake the two, yet buzzing with happiness. “Come take a look. *Oh* how I wish he could see this!”

“Why are you whispering? Didn’t we come here to wake him up for good?” he commented, but every last hint of confusion and complaining vanished in a blink as he caught on, eyes trailing over his brother’s sleeping figure.

Though his Wei Ying sleeping so soundly was a fond sight he would never share with anyone, Lan Wangji guessed (more like forced himself to think) it was not too much of a problem if those cooing over him were his long-known siblings. With a single glance at the light wipe of Yanli’s hand over her eyes and at the look of relief on Wanyin’s, he knew they shared the same thought as him when he first layed eyes on him in the morning: the cheery boy deprived of joy and looking like the ghost version of himself throughout the whole conflict, which lasted approximately two years, who had worried and often frightened all those that cherished him, now looked as sweet and innocent as the little child he was embracing.

On the other hand, another fortunate thought crossed his mind upon gazing at his sleeping lover: Lan Wangji had the foresight to cover up his chest and hide away the several bruises and love marks that had started to blossom since night time— which literally was the only positive result of him not having a golden core that could instantly heal them.

Slowly getting over the heartwarming scene for her own sake (and for the fact they were intruding on a private moment), it took Jiang Yanli some time to gather the will to wake up her adorable brother without scaring the child that clung to him so trustingly.

“Five more minutes, Lan Zhan...” he muttered in an hushed tone, curling more onto himself and shutting his eyes tightly at the intrusion, unaware that it was his adored sister calling for him, and not his lover. “You owe me two hours of sleep...”

Yanli’s hand stilled, Jiang Cheng’s eyes blinked rapidly, and Lan Wangji... Lan Wangji was very quietly dying on the inside, and despite the deep blush dyeing the tip of his ears a bright red, his resolve and sturdiness did not break.

He didn't run, for no matter where he was, he always complied with the Lan rules he knew by heart. But he couldn't endure the shame that wished to crawl upon him at the moment. So call it ‘running’ or ‘quick pace’, either way he was awfully fast when he sat by Wei Wuxian’s side to shake him awake, his voice firm and his call curiously phrased.

“Wei Ying, your brother and sister have brought breakfast.”

Wei Wuxian opened his mouth drowsily before he hesitated, and he seemed to realize something by the way his eyes suddenly sprung open, his body jolting up from the bed and startling the poor kid in his arms. Lan Wangji had a sour look on his face, but the pink on his lobes was enough to have him figure it all out.

A bit awkwardly, he peered behind him to meet eyes with Yanli and Cheng.

“Ah! Shijie! Jiang Cheng!” he quickly tried to divert the general attention away from whatever he had mumbled and occupied himself with waking up the still drowsy child in his

arms. “A’Yuan, food is waiting for us! Xian-gege is hungry.”

The little child slowly opened his eyes, blinking away the blinding light that filtered in from the windows and soon finding shelter on Wei Wuxian’s lap, hiding his face against his dark robes.

“A’Yuan’s sleepy...” he whined softly, and everyone cooed at the action, successfully putting aside Wei Wuxian’s bold words. Seeing the child behave like this and release the tension steeped in the room, Wei Wuxian felt sleep crash over him all over again, and he let his body fall back atop the mattress, curling more onto itself.

“Me *too*...”

“Wei Ying...”

But Lan Wangji was there, so were his siblings, and it was fairly late. There was no way he could sleep now.

Wei Wuxian pouted and growled, scoffing loudly. “*Fine*.” he lamented, and lifted the arm that was wrapped around the child to give him the chance to raise. “A’Yuan, you have to get up...”

With a bit of insistence from Yanli-jiejie and the sound of his rumbling stomach, the child finally abandoned his slumber and lifted himself up on shaking arms, but did not go too far, for he stayed on his knees atop the bed to get his Xian-gege to *just get up!! Food is waiting!!!*

“Even a child is more authoritative than you.” Jiang Cheng humored from afar, eliciting a soft laughter from his sister, who was already filling their table with mouth-watering food.

Quelling the kid and feeling that his sleep-time was long gone, Wei Wuxian finally rose from bed, limping blindly and in his drowsy state toward the table, following the familiar, delicious smell that reached out to him and recognizing it.

Instantly, his eyes brightened childishly as he scooped next to Lan Wangji, so close that their thighs and shoulders touched. “Pork ribs and lotus roots soup!”

While Jiang Cheng cross-eyed him and scowled at his inconsiderate behaviour, the shameless of which embarrassed him to no end, Yanli noticed the happy smile that tugged at Lan Wangji’s lips when Wei Wuxian pressed against him, which would have normally been considered unnerving by someone as private and introvert as him who hated physical contact. Instead, he seemed enthusiast about it, so, despite her own blush, Yanli told his fuming brother to close an eye and eat, before the soup grew cold.

“Ah, right.” Yanli said once she had finished eating her small portion, Lan Zhan had too, watching her brothers pause to stare at her. “I forgot to warn you. I asked someone to pick a change for Young Master Lan, but the clothes we have here all belong to Yunmeng Jiang. I am afraid we could not find anything that suited you more.”

Despite her insistent apologize, Lan Wangji reassured her not to worry about it: a change was quite welcomed, for he could not walk out wearing torn robes or less layers than it was allowed, so right now he only wore his inner two layers plus one he bought along the way. That's why he couldn't have left Wei Wuxian's room this morning even if he wished to— not that he wanted to miss on the sight of Wei Ying adorably sleeping clutched next to a child.

Keeping dirty-minded thoughts for when they will be alone, Wei Wuxian put down the bowl, licked his lips clean of broth, and snickered. “Give him ours, Shijie! I want to see Lan Zhan dress in dark clothes!”

Yanli blinked stupidly once, twice, before she had to turn and hide her face. Lan Wangji's fair earlobes shaded a dark crimson, too. Jiang Cheng tried to keep it in, but he bursted out at such indecency the same moment his face did.

“*Wei Wuxian!*”

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A bunch of hours later, as scheduled by the Lan disciple and executed daily in the afternoon, Wei Wuxian was laying on bed, hands crossed behind his head and smile laying across his lips as he listened with a light heart to the gentle melody echoing across his room, the result of Lan Wangji's expert hands and gentle fingers on the strings of his *qugin*.

“It feels good.” he hummed, eyes shut, taking in the soothing effects of the melody which Lan Zhan forced him to listen to to avoid any lingering by-product or delayed effect of the backlash he suffered not that many days ago. Despite his persistence to play for him, Wei Wuxian was well-aware of his body's condition and he *knew* he was fine, much better - both mentally and physically - than he has never been throughout years where getting quality sleep and good rest was as rare as experiencing genuine happiness.

Still, even when he laid on bed, forced to go through a few rounds of Purification Tunes his mate pressed him for, Wei Wuxian wasn't even closely as remorseful and annoyed as he would have felt once if he had been forced to undergo this kind of treatment: he couldn't deny how nice and beneficial it was to his body to cleanse all the stress and resentment he's accumulated— only because this time, even without counting on the invincibility his golden core granted him, his body wouldn't rote and his soul wouldn't be continuously attacked by ghosts and whatnot in his effort of protecting others by dint of the external support he received, as he could partially subdue his demonic cultivation thanks to the incomparably improved living condition (from rags to riches, really, as he needn't hide anymore in the Burial Mounds but could freely live in Lotus Piern with his family) and the hopeful changes this second life brought him.

Still, if anyone but Lan Wangji had suggested he played cleansing and soul-soothing tunes for him, every and each day performing all the songs of Clarity he learnt in twenty years, the

response of the once Yiling Patriarch wouldn't have been as reluctant and cautious, nor would he have given in to the plea.

But it was *Lan Wangji*. His Lan Zhan.

An hour of music later and having long finished his agreed-on daily session of meditation, he decided to enjoy the rest of the performance and greedily grace himself with the sight of his new-found lover while he played on the zhiter, turning on his side with his hand supporting his head upright, watching with shimmering eyes and a smile, twinkling with mischief.

"What is it?" Lan Wangji asked as soon as he noticed, never stilling his fingers. It was quite the comparison, his low and deep voice overlapping the gentle, high-pitched melody— Wei Wuxian felt his spine arch without his consent, a shiver running it up and down.

"You look even more handsome when you play." he said, filter-free, and Lan Zhan's fingers stalled, a deep flush blooming in his fair earlobes. As a result, Wei Wuxian's grin boardened and he shot outside of bed, catching instantly the way golden eyes followed him closely as tracked his every movement while he approached.

"What, Hanguang-Jun can't take a compliment?" he teased. He circled around the table where the zither rested and lifted his left leg to the other side of Lan Wangji, looking down at him with a glow.

And then carelessly *dropped* onto his lap, startling the poor man and making him flinch, *hard*. Not only Lan Zhan, but something else down there did too—

Faking ignorance and innocence, he wrapped his long arms around his neck. "So?"

"Cleansing was supposed to sooth body and soul." he said pointingly, loud was the restrain in his voice. He quietly snicked his arms around his waist and pulled him closer, resulting on another heavenly slide of their half-hardened cocks.

Involuntarily - or was it? - a quiet whimper left Wei Wuxian's lips, and Lan Wangji felt his breath freeze for a long moment. Wei Ying leaned further in until his breath fanned the fair earlobes of the man, while his hands played with his forehead ribbon.

"It worked." he said, and sent him a blinding smile. "But I think seeing your fingers on the zhiter reminded me some of last night's *playing*."

And just like that, he bit his lobe, sucking it inside his mouth and staining it with his spit, feeling Lan Wangji's response and his pleasure spark below his asscheeks until his cock slipped right in between, making him buckle his hips, inviting.

"Hanguang-Jun," he called, voice flirtuos and full of intention, "are you going to help out this humble one?"

And Lan Wangji's poor resolve shattered as he pushed Wei Wuxian flat on the floor and crawled above him, hand and mouth getting busy quickly and working him on until his joyous laughter turned into a cascade of soft moans and whimpers.

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After confirming the well-being of both Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji and discussing it with the newly born couple (he still didn't know what to think about that, but dared not voice his thoughts), Jiang Fengmian made sure to alert the head family of Gusu Lan of the safe return of their second young master in their homeland through a letter.

After the fifth day, the ex-leader of the Jiang Clan received a letter of gratitude from Lan Xichen who thanked him profusely for reaching out to him as soon as his brother returned safely and for his hospitality, also thanking him for filling him in on fresh news, from Lan Wangji's homecoming to a much more detailed explanation of what he and Wei Wuxian have done and discussed about in recent days (the cryptic message inferring their desire to be discreet about the whole matter). The young leader also apologized for his inability to leave Cloud Recesses to visit, for his Clan still needed adjustments and time to heal after the Wen's attack. Also, he mentioned the second envelop attached to the former, asking him the courtesy to have it delivered to Lan Wangji.

And so he did, completely unaware of its content. The letter was personally brought to Second Young Master Lan the same morning it was delivered to Lotus Pier.

He decided to use the excuse of a delivery to pay Wei Wuxian a visit, because despite the ruckus of urgency and fear aroused upon his return to Lotus Pier with Young Master Lan a few days ago, Jiang Fengmian had finally caught a glimpse of the vibrant, genuine and lively child he was not-so-secretly fond of and had lost sight of a few years ago, before the war broke and the treacherous air of the Burial Mound tainted his soul and stole his smile.

The sudden transition from the easygoing Wei Wuxian of bygone summer days to the brittle version of him had seemingly reversed, and the son of his late friends had now returned to how he once was, a perfect reminiscent of both parents—with Wei Cangse's facial traits and well-built figure and Cangse Sanren's enchanting personality and cheerful smile.

However Lan Wangji managed to achieve so, he could only be grateful and thankful that the Wei Ying he had known for so long has finally made his way home through hardships.

When he handed over the letter, he watched them with a rough throat and an odd feeling of awkwardness, glancing at the way Wei Wuxian closed up to Lan Wangji, leaving less than an inch between them, and the way the latter simply let him do as he pleased without trace of complain or discomfort, but welcoming.

He also watched as the light atmosphere was suddenly whisked away by the sour frown overtaking Lan Wangji's face and slightly sagged shoulders when he read privately through the content of the letter - a privacy he had not demanded off Wei Ying, but that the latter had granted him without questions despite always being noisy and unrestricted.

When Wei Wuxian noticed, he was instantly demanding explanations. “What is it, Lan Zhan?”

“...Uncle wants me to return to Gusu.”

And any doubt Jiang Fengmian had regarding the genuineness of whichever relationship the two of them had built over time went flying off the window when he saw the way Wei Wuxian's nowadays-rare joy vanished from his eyes and his heart *sunk*.

“When?”

And if it could, Lan Wangji's face turned even duller, lips pulled tightly. “...Tonight.”

Silver eyes' widened, gaped, within one single beat, a long moment of silence passing between them.

“Wei Ying...”

But as much as Wei Wuxian feared what would be of him if the two of them were to be divided, he could not let it weigh down on Lan Zhan even more than it already was. So, bravening up (it really scared him how quickly he grew dependent on Lan Zhan) he put on a bold grin, straightened up and—

“Come on Lan Zhan, it's not that bad!” again, the grin that split across was wide, but it didn't reach his eyes. “We can just take turns to visit one another!”

Lan Wangji's anxious look smoothened for a moment in sight of another emotion. “I will come.”

With a look of surprise, Wei Wuxian quietly caught on the words left unsaid— *it will be much faster and more efficient if we travel on swords, but you can not, so let me do it.*

“Fine, let's do it your way.” he shrugged, happy nonetheless— just slightly annoyed that he had to bother him to such extent.

So, they waited outside for Lan Zhan to pack what little belongings he had here in Yunmeng. When he came out of the room with the bare minimum, just his sword and some items stored in there, Wei Wuxian kept watching him from afar; he didn't have the time to utter a single word before Wei Yuan saw Lan Wangji and ran to him, a tearful pout on his lips.

“Ji-gege! Don't leave!”

A smile split Wei Wuxian's lips, spreading ear to ear. He felt the familiarity of the scene not for the first time, and it brought a nice

“No running.” Lan Wangji reprimanded the child firmly, yet gently, while looking down. A'Yuan nodded in understanding, though he still clung to his leg with a desperate hold.

“Don’t go, Ji-gege! Don’t leave.”

Lan Wangji was at a loss.

Wei Wuxian snickered at the sight, but his heart sagged. He was reminded of a distant time when the same child had screamed out and cried loudly while he clung to a startled Wangji upon first meeting him, the ruckus catching the village’s general attention and many’s complains, but now...

Two different memories overlapped and he blinked stupidly once, twice, thrice at the scene before an unexpected look of fondness washed over his face, replacing the bark of laughter he would have— should have felt resonate in his body instead of the warm flutter nestled inside his chest.

In that brief instant, Wei Wuxian felt the over-existent hollowness in his heart fill with contentness and warmth, and it felt like putting together the last pieces of a difficult puzzle — or even more, discovering anew the two missing pieces that were not there before.

Wei Wuxian’s eyes were like a pond full of affection.

Lan Wangji with a kid was such a sight.

“...xian. Wei Wuxian!” his head jolted back and his eyes snapped when he recoiled at the sudden voice yelling in his ear, spinning around and almost bumping on Jiang Cheng.

“What were you doing, staring off like that?” he inquired, more curious than ever, and then proceeded to track his line of sight to— “Oh?”

Wei Wuxian’s usually undisturbed face turned a deep shade of pink as he grew uncharacteristically quite and deeply frustrated, heaving a sigh and averting his eyes at the shameless grin growing wide on his martial brother’s face.

“Oh right... Hanguang-Jun and A’Yuan.” he japed, amusement coating his tone, and Wei Wuxian groaned out of frustration.

“A’Cheng,” Yanli beckoned, but the grin blooming on her lips didn’t seem all that supporting, “stop making fun of A’Xian’s crush.”

“S-Shijie! Not you too!”

They cracked up and let a loud round of laughs ring free. Despite his embarrassment, it helped him loosen the tight grasp on his chest and heart.

Evening their breathing, they turned back to the conversation at hand when Wei Qing reached up to take Wei Yuan from Lan Wangji’s arms, scolding him for making such a ruckus while gently wiping his tears-strained face.

“He is not leaving forever.” she scoffed gently, cradling him close. “Hanguang-Jun will visit.”

And the kid peered up, looking at the Lan cultivator with pouty, watery eyes. “You will?”

And, to everyone's absolute surprise, Lan Wangji actually *smiled*. "Of course."

"But— How much? When?" he demanded, hesitant to give in to trust, looking adorable with his puffy cheeks and swollen eyes.

"Soon enough."

While the pouty child complained still in the arms of his cousin, Wei Wuxian walked over and slumped against Lan Wangji's body, smiling at the feeling of his arm sneaking around his thin waist.

"We will see each other in a few weeks, right?" he urged, eyes gleaming with childish hope as he clung to his collar. "For my Shijie's wedding."

And Lan Wangji's face melted into a pond of affection, his free hand crawling up to cup his cheek as he gave a light nod. "Mmh."

Wei Wuxian's eyes beamed and the sight warmed Lan Wangji's heart, so much that he tightened his hold and pulled him closer for a minute, as though he feared that his lover would disappear if he let him go. The other felt on edge as well, but his tension came from the knowledge he possessed, memories of events which clearly suggested that his enemies were scheming against him, ready to strike at any moment.

"We will see each other soon, Lan Zhan." he pressed, resolute yet gentle, and leaned up to peck his lips for a swift kiss, grinning teasingly upon retracting and seeing the shocked look painted across Lan Wangji's face. Behind him, beside the collective gasps of surprise his co-disciples let, Jiang Cheng and Wen Qing growled in repugnance, their annoyance feeding his smirk.

He finally stepped back, pointing toward the port with his head. "Go on."

And Lan Wangji nodded, bowing down and formerly announcing his parting, extending proper thankful words at Jiang Fengmian and Jiang Cheng for the hospitality (quietly bypassing the redness of their face and his own embarrassment for his and Wei Ying's shameless act). Finally, he took a few steps back and retreated, but prolonged the eye contact with Wei Wuxian for as long as he could, staring deep into his crescent moons and struggling to break such powerful link until the very end.

(And if people harassed Wei Wuxian about '*What is going on with you and Young Master Lan??*' or '*For how long has this been going on?*' - beside the disrespectful comments Wei Wuxian dared not attune his ears to - and he simply giggled and laughed along without offering satisfactory answers to fuel gossip, it wasn't anyone's business but his.)



## Chapter 3

### Chapter Summary

"Jin Zixuan lifted his arm to her face, catching her gaze as he gently removed a petal stuck between her perfectly styled hair and let it slid off his open palm, unconcerned of its destination as his attention was entrapted by the gorgeous woman standing before his very eyes, his newly acclaimed wife.

Yanli was truly, earnestly the happiest person in the world, and would for long time be remembered as the brightest, most beautiful bride to come."

Five months after the night-haunt in Nightless City, Lanling Jin proudly sent another invitation where they finally announced the wedding ceremony of Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan.

The ceremony was nothing short of extravagant on both parts, for the groom was the heir of the wealthy, squandering Lanling Jin, while the gorgeous broom was the fairy maiden - now titled Madam Jin - cherished by the whole Clan of Yunmeng Jiang, the woman whose wedding would be huge by promise of her siblings.

During the ceremony, before the arrival of the bride and groom, Wei Wuxian slid behind the crowd to climb the far off corner of the hall and waited up to the last moment for the announcement of the spouses' arrival before lifting Chenqing to his lips.

Following the slow pace of the ceremony, gently, the air started to vibrate with a sweet tune, firm yet soft to remain as background. It accompanied his sister throughout the wedding, starting from her entrance - striding over with gorgeous, rich red robes which looked so elegant and yet somber around her body - until the exchange of promises and commitment.

They bowed once, twice, thrice, and the look on every family member of the bride was pure, overwhelming happiness— tears stung Wei Wuxian's glimmering eyes, as he was finally allowed to share his sister's big day with her.

As the very last note echoed across the crowded hall and the melodic tune drew to an end, a strong, yet gentle gust of wind teared flowers from the nearby trees and brought them over the open field, pink petals that scattered above their heads and swayed mid-air like a gentle rain. Before the magnificent scene, Yanli reached out with her hand to grab some, her smile enlarging.

People exclaimed words of adoration, the hearts of the women buzzing with delight to witness such a beautiful and romantic landscape as well as envy, watching petals scatter around the beautiful couple standing at the center as a melodic tune was hummed gently for the ear to bask in, giving off a very suggestive atmosphere.

As Jiang Yanli watched the scene unfold around her, her eyes began to water as she caught sight of her two brothers standing atop the walls of the hall, waving down at her with large, gleeful smiles on their faces, no doubt the source of the melody and magic scenery she had been gifted with.

*‘Wait and see! Yours will be the greatest and most beautiful wedding of all times!’*

In a world full of obstacles and hardships, she knew the only reason she could walk forward was that she had at her side people like her brothers who, busy as they were, could still occupy their time with silly things such as musical accompaniment and a rain of petals if just to make her happy, unconcerned by what others thought of them as long as their gift was appreciated.

And appreciated it *was*.

Jin Zixuan lifted his arm to her face, catching her gaze as he gently removed a petal stuck between her perfectly styled hair and let it slid off his open palm, unconcerned of its destination as his attention was entrapped by the gorgeous woman standing before his very eyes, his newly acclaimed wife.

Yanli was truly, earnestly the happiest person in the world, and would for long time be remembered as the brightest, most beautiful bride to come.

Regardless of the occasion or celebratory event they starred in, the pompous pretentiousness and inclination to show off were innate attributes of the Jin Clan— indeed, it topped in Wei Wuxian’s list of things to dislike about Jin Zixuan, his fiery stubbornness and arrogance, thus entitling him ‘peacock’. Such unattractive behaviour was common knowledge, so everyone had long gotten used to it (as frustrating as it could be).

Of course, this unhealthy tradition to go the whole hog couldn’t be ignored in occasion of the wedding of the heir and future leader of said Clan.

Everything was as overdone as all guests predicted it to be: from the abundant ornaments and decorations arranged all across the residence and surrounding towers, painting the golden city a scarlet red, to the perfectly lined up servants and maids - an amount that could scare you into guessing what they needed all of them for - scattered around to occupy every hallway and courtyard of the city to sing their congratulations, to the lengthy celebration on itself— a fully scheduled week, five continuous days of miscellaneous activities and clamorous banquets to feast.

But for the first time in two lives, Wei Wuxian was in the middle of the road, not minding it as much as he should— after all, the bride was his sister, and she deserved all of the sumptuousness, beauty and glory the world had to offer (even more when it did nothing to change her genuineness and humbleness). The Jin Clan just happened to share the same view

and unwittingly met Jiang Cheng and Wei Wuxian's lifetime dream to make their sister's wedding unforgettable.

Behind that, he still held a tinge of doubt, sensing mischievous intentions underneath the facade of hospitality and unpaid-for goodness—he couldn't guess whether it was the result of Jin Guangshan's unreasonable personality and his wish to show-off his Clan's wealth... or if there was another explanation, a well-concealed plan to hide his true intentions and put snow behind their back while acting deceitful. Wei Wuxian was alert and astute enough to notice the latter's latest nudging and unnatural openness toward other Clans, reading through him and unmasking all those times he exhibited his leadership—but if it was the position of Chief Cultivator what he strived for, no matter how much sly scheming he did or the amount of smartness he put on display with those pompous speech of his, could he *ever* obtain that?

Wrapping up the verbose week of celebrations was a huge, merry banquet set up in Golden Carp Tower to round off the wedding in the most efficient way. The day proceeded beautifully, no clouds or rain staining the sky or obscuring one's view of the stars.

No matter what, though, it was naive to think the merry celebration would stop anyone from abusing their power and putting on a show before all the higher-ranked leaders of the martial world, figure the Jin Clan—whose members behaved like stars of the stage, claiming the spotlight with dramatic words which caught the attention of the audience.

Wei Ying especially felt stupid to underestimate the chance of this outcome (one would think to keep bureaucratic matters for appropriate moments, but it seemed Clan Leader Jin didn't mind taking advantage of the wedding banquet of his own son to bother him).

“Since Young Master Wei has joined us on this occasion, there is a matter of utmost urgency I would like to discuss with you specifically.” echoed the droning, self-congratulatory sound of Jin Guangshan's voice.

Wei Wuxian feigned ignorance, but did not bother to fake a smile as well. “With me, Clan Leader Jin? What is it?”

The man noticed his low temperament and squared him up and down with an exhaustive, suspicious look. “After the end of the war, the major Clan Leaders have reunited in Nightless City to destroy the three shards of Yin Metal that Wen Ruohan possessed to prevent more catastrophes. Although I have to admit your demonic cultivation has turned quite useful for the Sunshot Campaign, now that the war has ended I hope you realize we couldn't possibly just leave you be, not with that tool of yours.”

Just like that time when Wei Wuxian had crashed a private banquet to confront Jin Zixun about forcing the surviving remnants of the Qishan Wen Clan into labor, Jin Guangshan seized the opportunity to suggest that Wei Wuxian should turn over the Yin Tiger Tally for all the Clans to guard—when in reality, he aimed to get possession of it.

Before he could, Jiang Fengmian cut in. "Clan Leader Jin, today is one among many joyous day. I do not consider this to be the appropriate occasion to bring about such conversation."

But Jin Guangshan wasn't repenting, he still had the courage or shamelessness to insist. "I do agree, friend of mine, but since we are already here, why not take care of such affair and get it done with?"

Wei Wuxian's eyes drifted to his Shijie, sitting next to Jin Zixuan: if the former was looking at him with a hurtful, concerned look, amber eyes holding an apologie as she understood that they were taking advantage of this occasion to mark him as the evil guy in public eye, the latter retained a firm, disappointed look sent exclusively to his own father. It was a relief, for Wei Wuxian, to see that the man Yanli had married caught on his own father's evil heart and so highly disapproved of it.

At least he knew she was in good hands (he had known it all along, ever since the moment in which Jin Zixuan looked up and payed him a sad smile, muttering his last words to his brother-in-law about his wife missing him even as blood poured out of him like wine from a shattered bottle, the shards of glass stained red like his golden robes).

Lanling Jin ought to have some integrity still if it had produced such an heir (seeing who he had as a father, it was safe to presume that Jin Zixuan took everything after his mother, probably).

Centering his focus back on the conversation at hand, his expression sharpened, yet remained unimpressed as he answered quite rudely. "Clan Leader Jin, what is that you want from me?"

"I am merely expressing the concern of every cultivator in this hall." he half-chuckled, half-cleared his throat while he made a wide gesture with his arms. "No one wishes for history to repeat itself right after we erased one evil."

Whispers of disciples surrounded the two, testing them. Jin Guangshan may feel all mighty and powerful on his stupid throne, his non-stop, arrogant grabbing for power hidden behind a golden facade, his influence feeding off outsiders' approval, but he did not know how to stand on his own two feet. While Wei Wuxian had everything he had not: ripped flesh and dried blood across a rotted body that went through Hell and back, scars of a life consumed and corrupted, claimed and returned one too many times, and a mind disrupted by knowledge, which was undeniably the most powerful weapon of his.

Crooked lips split forcefully apart where a humoreless chuckle passed through, ringing across the tension-struck hall and sending shivers running across most's back.

"*We?*" his eyebrows twitched, disdain latching to his tone. "Forgive me and my poor memory, Clan Leader Jin, but I don't remember seeing you at the Sunshot Campaign." he glared, and the man barely held back a flinch. "How is it that *now* you are carrying everyone's *said* concern?"

"You have poor memory indeed. You forget my own son was there, and Meng Yao was rewarded for being the hand that killed Wen Ruohan."

Bringing up the latter only resulted in controversial reactions— many may celebrate him as a hero, but to the eyes of a large amount of people he was still a traitor who joined hands with the devil and only redeemed himself when the war drew to its inevitable end by siding with the victorious side.

He heard Nie Mingjue's scowl from his seat, recognizing and sharing the look of hatred and resentment in his eyes, though he didn't speak his mind in respect. Wei Wuxian spared him one lasting glance, reminiscent of the two's collision in front of the Inferno Palace.

For peace, and for his sister, he decided not to pursue the conversation.

Among many that wished to speak, Clan Leader Yao rose up. "Wei Wuxian, wouldn't it be better for anyone if you just handed over that weapon?"

Whispers broke the heavy silence of the room, before his eyes emerged from his lashes, coated with blood. "Give it over for you to do *what*?" he asked, tongue sharp and words biting, defiant. "I fear you might be underestimating my intelligence."

Clan Leader Yao scowled at the verbal offense, Jin Guangyao cleared his throat and turned toward him with a well-crafted smile. "Young Master Wei, considering how many lives we have lost due to a weapon of similar power, we can not trust such spirited tool in the hands of one." he stated.

Jin Guangshan grinned, raising his voice when he thought his words could win over the argument, as well as the other Clans' trust. "Exactly. Just give it over and we can all let bygones be bygones. No one shall disturb you afterwards."

*Yeah, nice try.* Jin Guangshan shouldn't have trusted such wrongly-spoken honesty to reach past him.

How eye-opening was it to hear the same man who sent the elders, children and crippled into labor for his own Clan's benefit speak up now about taking pity on the dead. He shoved down the desire to say it outloud, words weighing on his tongue, reminding himself this banquet was supposed to be a happy celebration.

Lazily, Wei Wuxian began to straighten up from his seat, showing no sympathy or respect to someone with no limits and no moral bounds to cement his power - from sheltering mass murderers, assassinating fellows and wronged...

*Even using his own son's death for political gain.*

His face hardened. "If you had expressed your honest wish to erase it while keeping in mind the safety of all, I would have most probably heard you out. It is, after all, a very dangerous weapon if in evil hands." he narrowed his eyes, marking his tone with implication. "What puzzles me is that you demand not to get rid of it, destroy it, or such... but to *hand it over*."

He watched his eyes widen for a fraction, and he knew he struck a nerve. Clan Leader Yao held a stronger resolution, being a self-appointed follower of justice (even when he was often misled by others and stopped analysing at a surface level).

“*Of course*, as we have done for the shard in the hands of Wen Ruohan, we suggest it is destroyed.”

Wei Wuxian’s red eyes flickered, their original silver shade overtaking the darker colour, his hateful frown shaping into feigned naivety. “If that is your concern, then of course I shall listen. All in all, I have already destroyed half of it.”

Of all the things he could have said, no one expected *that*, because they knew how powerful of a weapon the Yin Tiger Tally was, so who in the right mindset would dare destroy it so carelessly? They really didn’t keep in count that he wasn’t as power-hungry as they were, but it still was amusing to see Jin Guangshan’s face *shatter*.

“W-What?”

Having listened to this conversation for too long, Jiang Cheng straightened up, bowed respectfully, and spoke. “Clan Leader Jin, I appreciate your concern, but I believe you might be underestimating Yunmeng Jiang. We, of course, have already discussed the sort of the Yin Tiger Tally and have put all the means to destroy it, under its owner’s assistance.”

Wei Wuxian’s smile enlarged into a smug smirk. (He had long anticipated this conversation and knew exactly which excuses Clan Leader Jin would bring about to claim possession over the weapon, so he had upfront discussed it with everyone— that being the only reason why Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan let the discussion happen at all).

So yeah, Jin Guangshan just made a fool of himself by claiming rights over someone else's property without priorly asking said Clan. Good for him.

Coming to his Clan Leader’s rescue - or believing it would do him good and go against Wei Wuxian - Jin Zixun asked for solid proofs, but of course no one had them (why should have they brought along the crumbs to prove the bread was eaten?). Not physically, at least.

Standing up with an immaculate look from his seat, to his Clan’s surprise, Lan Wangji joined the conversation. “I can attest to Wei Wuxian’s words.”

And the silent hall broke in loud whispers, chaos erupting up and front as all eyes travelled back and forth between the two cultivators who sat across one another and held their gaze. Wei Wuxian couldn’t help the fond smile that grew in his lips, his shoulders and jax relaxing as he stared at his lover with soft, grateful eyes.

“Hanguang-Jun?” Nie Mingjue chimed in the conversation once it took a much more serious turn, looking amused to see someone from the Gusu Clan speak up and defend Wei Wuxian. “How so?”

Bowing again at the Clan Leader, he answered. “Because Wei Ying requested my help to destroy it.”

Another noise of dissent.

“He can’t be trusted! He is close to Wei Wuxian, he must have bribed him!” Jin Zixun claimed, but regretted it as soon as he caught Lan Qiren’s glacial glare. Accusing a high-ranked Lan, nonetheless the brother of the current Clan Leader who was conferred the titled of Hanguang-Jun for his honesty and commitment to the greater cause, of lying was a serious affront.

“I didn’t mean to accuse Hanguang-Jun.” he tried to justify himself and his fit of upset, barely repressing a scoff, but looking as though he would rather do anything but address Lan Wangji as his superior. “But when and where would they have destroyed it? And why act so secretly? It *is* suspicious!”

“What does it matter when or how? You only wanted it destroyed so that no ill-intentioned could possess it, right?” now that Lan Wangji was brought in the conversation, Wei Wuxian was starting to grow irritated, and *fuck* if they should have kept their mouth *shut*. “Unless someone here wishes to do something else with it.”

“How dare you make such implications!” Jin Zixun snarled, fat hand slamming against the wooden table. “Wei *Wuxian*, watch your mouth when talking someone more high-ranked than you!”

“*I* believe *everyone* should watch their mouth.” finally, Madam Yu thought her intervention necessary to finish this conversation, her heated tone running across everyone’s back, an alert to keep it shut. “I won’t stand such arrogance during my own daughter’s wedding!”

Wei Wuxian did not even get offended, only recoiled with amusement and watched as Clan Leader Jin shrunk with terror, while Yanli smiled grateful, but saddened. The sight instantly wiped the smile out of his face.

“Ziyan is right.” Madam Jin agreed with a nod of her head, throwing a vicious look specifically to her husband. “Let’s put this matter aside for now.”

Needless to say, Clan Leader Jin did not dare insist on the matter after he obtained such harsh reproach in public, also frightened to be on the responsive side of the wrath of two women such as Madam Jin, his own wife who would later make him pay for ruining their son’s wedding banquet, and Madam Yu. Rare were the people who didn’t fear Yu Ziyan.

Wei Wuxian sighed and sunk back in his seat before he suddenly made eye contact with Lan Zhan, learning that he had been watching over here for all this time. He blinked away the red colour in his irides and smiled back at the man, taking a soothing breath before he relaxed.

When the last night of the wedding finally drew to its end and everyone was to retire in the quarters specifically assigned for them, Wei Wuxian was the first to excuse himself in front of Madam Yu, Uncle Jiang and Jiang Cheng and slide out of the hall, feeling his head buzz uncomfortably and his skin sweat as he struggled to keep his mind at ease.

Right outside, leaning against the exterior wall of the residence with a weakness that lately he seemed to carry everywhere, he was breathing painfully in and out, feeling the voices inside his head grow immensely louder, taking advantage of his vulnerability in a place that smelled like hostility.

When he turned around, expecting to find no one in his line of sight, he found the only person he had deep desire to see right now.

Lan Wangji.

He stood silent, but watched as the boy who reciprocated his feelings approached him until they stood mere inches away from one another, breathing the same sweet air.

“Lan Zhan...” he called, smiling weakly when he heard him hum. “Play for me again?”

With a softened look that sent butterflies flying across his close to empty stomach, Lan Wangji promptly answered his request and reciprocating with a smile of his own. “Anything for Wei Ying.”

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“Insolent!”

Deep in the night, within the secluded, extravagantly-built main hall of Lanling Jin, door shut to outsiders’ eyes and ears and heavily guarded from the outside, Clan Leader Jin unleashed his fury, pacing with anger marking the deep wrinkles across his nose and cheeks, the noise of clacking teeth filling the space around him.

“Father, appease your anger.” his illegitimate son quickly performed a bow, trying to soothe his tense nerves.

“I can’t— I can’t—” he stammered, his face growing redder as his anger increased. “Did you hear what that brat said!? How *dare* a lowly servant behave in such unruly manner in my own residence!? And in front of everyone!”

Jin Guangshan couldn’t quiet digest what had occurred a few hours prior. Because of Wei Wuxian, the head disciple of an *outer* Clan, he almost made a fool of himself in front of very important guests, pushed into a corner by that sharp-tongued viper of a demonic cultivator!

That’s what he kept repeating in a loud voice, furious, lest he would acknowledge such defeat for what it really was. All in all, it was *him* who took advantage of the event to draw everyone’s eyes on the boy’s unruliness: his plan to make it so that the four major Clans would grow untrusty of him and then blame him when something bad happened next, allowing him to snick in and discover his cultivation’s secrets, now felt like a total *waste*.

Jin Guangyao caught his focus, his posture looking slightly awkward— but with a purpose. “You are right, Father. Since what he has done for Lotus Pier, Young Master Wei has been considered a promising young hero. But now that he has turned to demonic cultivation, people will grow suspicious of him. And if we play our cards right, so will Yunmeng Jiang.”



Truth is, up until now Jin Guangshan had trusted his illegitimate son's advises and aid, but they didn't seem to give results. So, watching him smile so pliantly and look as nothing could upset him, always so irritatingly calm and unbothered, he was starting to grow in his nerves.

"What do I even consult you for!? You say he can lose Yunmeng Jiang's support, but now even Yu Ziyuan is more *lenient* toward him!" And he shoved him back in a fit of rage, turning around without a care in the world and swatting his long sleeves with a huff.

"F-Father, forgive this one's inexperience." he exclaimed in defense, bowing thoroughly to appease him.

The other cleaned his appearance, shoulders sagging as he scoffed, turning away with clear annoyance. "What could I ever expect from you, a bastard son..." he said, and because of turning his back to him, he missed the change of expression in the face of the boy, his eyes rounding up before his expression darkened, hardened, and his smile twisted, hatred and anger taking form in the creases of his furrow even while he maintained his elegant bow.

He payed him no mind, too far-in in his thoughts.

Jin Guangshan not-so-secretly despised all the major Clan—the Nie were as sturdy and strong as they were brutal, while the only positive thing about the Lan Clan was their confidentiality and disinterest for mundane affairs, and as for the Jiang... they had suffered too many losses to be considered a threat, though they were good at earning people's trust.

But Wei Wuxian... he was no Clan Leader, no person of influence, and yet, Jin Guangshan despised him more than *anyone*—his misplaced haughtiness and overgrowing arrogance without basis, without solid power. And yet, he was becoming someone whose name sparked fear in the depths of people's souls, growing out of a reputation he had built brick by brick, quite literally, off shed blood and scarred flesh and burned meat.

He was a threat to behold. A threat he would have to do something about, soon.

"What about that young boy you told me about? The one promising weilder of demonic cultivation?" he inquired suddenly, lowering his tone as he suspiciously eyed his son, feeling fatigued due to his outburst. Jin Guangyao looked between his upset father and the door, before smiling devilishly.

"Father, he is here."

He hummed positively. "Let him in."

At a sign of his hand, the door cracked open, revealing the short figure of a young boy advancing across the lengthy hall of the palace wearing arrogance like women did fine jewelries.

"Have you asked of me, Clan Leader Jin?" said boy inquired with a bow, hand to the heart and smirk board.

“Yes.” Jin Guangshan folded hands behind his back as he stared into the distance before he turned around to face the new entry, meeting eyes with a figure that stood in the darkness, a young, slim boy bowing in acknowledgment to the leader. “I believe your role has been meticulously explained to you already.”

“Clear as a bell, Sir.” he deepened his bow further, amusing the older. Jin Guangshan nodded and returned to his seat, resting his pounding head against his closed fist and sighing. Swaying his hand mid-air, he gave him signal to head off, the threat of power heavy in the air.

“Do not disappoint me, Xue Yang.” he said at once, and the young man’s smirk only grew larger.

“Rest assured, Clan Leader Jin.”

And with those simple words, he backed away and left the hall, confident steps echoing loud and severe behind him until the outer door closed at once.

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Summary

"Wei Ying blinked, and Zixun halted at the sudden sight of crimson blood on them. It felt like looking inside an active volcano with voracious souls lunging at you, knocking air out of his chest. "I think I have proven myself more than once. I can't say I am rightful and honest for you won't hear neither, but my conscience is clear, and that is more than most of you can say.""

## Chapter Notes

\*\*The translation "Stygian Tiger Seal" has been replaced with the more accurate "Yin Tiger Tally", so you'll find this one from now on. <3

The residents and welcomed guests of Golden Carp Tower savoured a long, action-packed week replete with festivities, luxurious banquets and lengthy celebrations, the pleasant diversion sidelining everyday's worries and duties for a much needed time of enjoyment. The Clan Leaders and elders primarily spent such time sharing a few drinks and chattering heatedly in between politic talks; when the youngers didn't pay them company for self-instruction, they often headed off to do their own thing and spend time with their peers.

In hindsight, many agreed that the event was specifically planned to suit the motive of extravagance and complacency, resulting sometimes in mixed, controversial thoughts even toward a wedding between two of the major Clans of the cultivation world; but the profound and lasting aura of happiness it brought along was welcomed with little complain from those who suffered major losses from the war and whose only wish was to erase painful memories to enjoy nice company and fine wine.

Weirdly enough, Wei Wuxian did not mind the extra display of richness and wealth considering his sister's happiness - what he *did* mind though was their prolonged stay in Lanling, surrounded by arrogant heirs of stuck-ups and likewise parents. If not for Yanli's happy wedding and his own contentness for being present to witness such blessed event unlike past times, he wouldn't have lasted this long. Luckily, Lan Wangji was there to make it all better, to ease and subdue the dreadful effects this ill company brought over him.

In all honesty, as long as he didn't cross path with people like Jin Zixun, he didn't have a difficult time enjoying himself. Maybe the credits went all to Lan Zhan playing once or twice a day each day for him, soothing his nerves and subduing the resentment in his system.

As a matter of fact, while he devoted the best of this week to drinking or playing along with Nie Huaisang and some other friends he rarely saw elsewhere, barring exceptions, he literally struck to Lan Wangji's side—as both a measure of self-preservation and complacency. He turned considerable mushier when he was with him, his increasingly more frequent bright smiles, carefree laughs and mocking manners growing proportionally in his presence, the comparison akin to the sensation of self-dominance a cultivator experienced while meditating, omitting even the healthiest of pleasures.

Such behaviour was of course bound to raise flags.

“You are acting strange around Young Master Lan.” his close friend, Nie Huaisang, inquired once, his narrow eyes peering suspiciously from above his open fan, studying him carefully. They were sitting in lines, all guests assembled and aligned in parallel with the walls of the head room for the last dinner banquet.

Wei Wuxian's chirping laughs were extremely contagious nowadays, and it brought tender warmth to the hearts of those who witnessed too much of his brooding looks and angry attitude.

“Me? Whatever do you mean?” he hid naughty laughs even when he cast a look toward where his still-secret lover sat, making brief eye contact with him before his attention was being forcefully claimed by a shrill of Nie Huaisang.

“That! What you *just* did!” he pinpointed with a raised voice, eyes wide and attentive. “Wei-xiong, are we not friends!?” he added petulantly, clearly asking for news and gossip, and Wei Ying rolled his eyes playfully at his pettiness and childishness.

“Lower your voice, will you?”

They stood considerably close to one another, the distance between them being that of a table and a half, but his voice was getting louder as the conversation went on, and it was starting to catch unwanted ears and eyes. Usually, during such huge reunions between Clans, Wei Wuxian would try his hardest to appear the less relevant and interested in what went said as he possibly could, too busy drowning in his fair share of alcohol to chase the rotted voices inside his head... but now, after going through so much and somehow managing to walk out of it unscathed, after finding the *oh so* hoped and strived for stability in Lan Wangji, he believed he had nothing else to feel so anxious about.

He was just *eager* to go back to him and do his everyday life. He knew there was no getting bored when Lan Zhan stood by - no matter the amount of *fun* activities they could do together.

“Let's raise a special toast now.”

Wei Wuxian's attention was quickly diverted when he caught by the corner of his eyes the golden silhouette of someone dashing across the room. He would have quickly dismissed it and returned to his discussion alongside Nie Huaisang if not for *who* he saw cross the room and go toward *whom*.

“Hanguang-Jun, Clan Leader Lan.” Jin Zixun greeted the two with a poor bow and a less respectful grin, the look on his face translatable as trouble and smelling like a rotten fish. Soon, he realized he was not the only one to notice the ambiguity and seriousness in his footsteps, and instantly caught sight of another member of Lanling Jin, Jin Guangyao, approaching his cousin with a tense look across his face, worried eyes shifting between the two Lan brothers.

“Zixun. Zewu-jun and Hanguang-Jun are from Lotus Recesses, they follow more than hundred of rules.” the man tried to reason, showing genuine respect for the two, but Jin Zixun cracked his neck annoyingly, clearly not interested, and scoffed. “If you wish to toast to them, instead of liquor maybe you should—”

“We of Lanling Jin and Gusu Lan are like close friends.” he swiftly cut off, lacking the respect and manners to mind interrupting someone so harshly, especially someone who had no status or power in his eyes. He interlocked eyes with the two, in his a challenging look. “If you don’t drink, I will take it as a form of disrespect.”

Congratulative words from just-as-blind-and-foolish idiots were spoken in respect of Jin Zixun, praising him for being frank and forthright.

“We are no strangers, Clan Leader Lan, so don’t treat us as such.” He brought up the hand holding the second cup of wine, furrowing his brows and hunching it forward for him to take. “Will you drink or not?”

In the end, despite Jin Guangyao’s honest attempt to persuade his young master and keep the cup away from Lan Xichen, the latter was forced to drink the wine, doing so with a barely-suppressed grimace. People looked sickly pleased from the accomplishment - except for Nie Mingjue, who probably despised Jin Zixun half as much as Wei Wuxian currently did, and was pretty familiar with Lan Xichen and his genuine devotion for his Clan’s rules.

The fact that these people forced him to drink for their own amusement was revolting, no matter how inoffensive it was.

Jin Zixun wasn’t satisfied yet: he grinned, filled the other cup with the same wine, and picked it up. “Hanguang-jun, it’s your turn now.”

Lan Wangji eyed that cup of wine with the most disgust in his face he could master without breaking a sweat, and then looked away, impassive as ever, dismissing Jin Zixun’s presence whatsoever even before many witnesses who insisted he *bent the rules for once, what is the harm of doing so?*

“I will drink for him.”

In a short moment, the cup in Jin Zixun’s hand vanished. Wei Wuxian stood a foot away from him, walking spontaneously under everyone’s eyes for a righteous cause, and drowned that cup of wine in one gulp. Then, he turned it over and showed with a sly grin that he had emptied its content.

“There, happy?”

No one had any idea of the level of self-control he had mastered until this moment to fight their arrogance and suppress this challenging and mocking side of his, especially around Jiang Cheng, Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan to avoid comments about him having no manners, no education, and ruining their reputation, but *how dare Jin Zixun try to force Lan Zhan to drink just for his own amusement*—

(Judging by the sudden feeling of *deja vu* he got from this action, he guessed something similar might have already occurred in the past, but he couldn't recall - blame him and his stupidly short memory.)

Jin Zixun looked pissed, but Wei Ying had anticipated that outcome and couldn't care in the slightest. Instead, he launched the cup back in the trail and turned around after catching a glimpse of a very surprised Lan Wangji (after years of practice and guesses, he finally mastered the art of reading through Second Young Master Lan's face to figure out his thoughts and feelings even when his expressions apparently looked all the same, and especially cherished it when his ears turned a delicious pink shade).

“Wei Wuxian, must you always act so unruly? You dare behave so arrogantly even before esteemed Clan Leaders?”

Wei Wuxian paused, tilted his head sideways and, unable to help himself, he laughed. “Me? Unruly? Arrogant?” Jin Zixun squared him up and down, not wavering but not counterattacking just then, either. He turned back around until he was facing him again, “Who was just now forcing Clan Leader Lan and Hanguang-Jun to act against their Clan's rules and drink for his own amusement?”

“What I did was simply raise a toast to them.” he replied, dismissing his words, bearing no weight, with a scoff. “It's just that unlike you, they know not to be disrespectful.”

Wei Ying scoffed. “I assume you wouldn't have been so daring if Master Lan was present, am I wrong?”

Jin Zixun found no words to reply and his face soured at the embarrassment, opening his ears to the whispers that rose from all around him. At his lack of response, another short snigger slipped out of Wei Ying's lips, one that he purposely let ring free before he cut through the chill silence. “One should examine oneself before thinking of condemning others, Jin Zixun. That is all I am willing to say to someone like you.”

Wei Wuxian didn't even attempt reasoning with this man anymore, nor did he waste his voice for someone who is unwilling to see himself in the mirror.

“Standing here so arrogantly, you think no one dares to offend you!?” he bit back at him, teeth clacking at his audacity. “You see yourself as someone invincible, shouldn't it be you the one to examine himself first!!?”

Wei Ying blinked, and Zixun halted at the sudden sight of *crimson blood* on them. It felt like looking inside an active volcano with voracious souls lunging at you, knocking air out of his chest. “I think I have proven myself more than once. I can't say I am rightful and honest for

you won't hear neither, but my conscience is clear, and that is more than most of you can say.”

He trailed his eyes around the room, tracking over the heads of those Clan Leaders and Young Masters who thought they could live out of others' fortune and skills to become influent and build their own fame, and then returned to Jin Zixun, his brows arching upward, challenging. “Go on, make use of innocents and of your foolish tactics to win people over. We shall see which game Heaven decides to play next.”

And just like that, bowing in the echoing silence of the room under wide eyes, he once and for all sat back down at his place and digged in his food, sealing his lips and eyes and letting time flow by.

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When the seven long days of celebration came to an end, the moment for all guests to return to their respective home finally arrived.

The joy to be reunited with Lan Zhan despite the occasional turmoils reached once more its peak and end, disrupted by the threat of an impending separation. The two of them spent the whole evening together, tucked in the latter's room with soft sheets draped over half-naked bodies, hair discarded and eyes shimmering with affection and sadness.

Wei Wuxian knew Lan Wangji could not just neglect his duties and Clan, the same way he could not vanish on Jiang Cheng or the Wen remnants, so he didn't make it difficult on him - even when their relationship brought up the discovery that he was the clingy type, the lover who could not fall asleep without their partner's warmth once they had experienced it.

It was heartbreaking. In the end, Lan Wangji returned to Gusu despite his wishes to spend more time with Wei Wuxian, but not without making plans and sharing promises— no, *vows* to visit Lotus Pier at least once every two weeks, insisting that it would be easier and faster for him since he could fly on Bichen and double his speed, while Wei Wuxian would have to travel on foot or on horse and then climb up the steep mountain.

The sad goodbye was kept at a minimum, for their relationship was still private to anyone but their respective families.

To return to Lotus Pier, Wei Wuxian rode on Sandu with Jiang Cheng since he could not use Suibian anymore - the poor weapon laying forgotten in a dark corner of his room so that he couldn't catch even a glimpse of it, lest harmful memories crossed his mind again.

Most of the time, Lotus Pier appeared vacant, no disciples filling the training field and no Yu Ziyuan screaming them around while her husband tried to ease her nerves - the two of them had left the city some days prior and would only return in a week or so to take care of some

matters for Jiang Cheng had already grown into his role of Clan Leader - but asked Wei Wuxian's help from time to time when he had too much work to be done in little time.

In truth, he knew too little of bureaucracy to be of help so he would mostly answer letters, but it was good spending time with his brother. He was still quite idle though, spending his time doing nothing or slacking off with Wei Yuan when he got tired of all the work and left Jiang Cheng behind to finish.

He was always grumpy about it, but still, he had noticed the huge change his brother had gone through and was not indifferent to it. He didn't get angry half as much as he did in the past, and they went back to bicker like when they were but children.

Just like that that, months went by.

Lan Wangji made sure to visit often and stayed over for as much as he could, always thankful to the head family for their warm welcome and hospitality. But as time flew, Wei Wuxian noticed how the days between two different visits increased, turning into weeks.

It wasn't Lan Wangji's fault - he was exhausted every time he came over, Wei Wuxian could see it and made sure he got his deserved rest -, but eventually his once every two weeks turned into once a month, and his sojourn never lasted more than five days, during which the two sometimes travelled and sometimes remained within Lotus Pier.

That's how Wei Ying looked over to his rare meetings with his lover, meanwhile trying to occupy the exceeding time with whatever came up to mind. He started helping Jiang Cheng more, easing some burdens when his parents could not, and marginally used his position of Head Disciple to train the Jiang disciples with swordsmanship, though he didn't do it actively - he helped them get the motion right, invited them to strive for *more* and *better*, straightened their stance when they swayed and adjusted their limbs when they tried archery. Sometimes it made him nostalgic, so up close to them and more experienced as he was, he still felt so inferior compared to them, the lack of a golden core getting to him harder and stronger, and it damn *hurt*—

Soon enough, the Jin Clan shared news that Jiang Yanli was expecting, which brought huge confliction in Wei Wuxian, the first thrill of excitement dulled by fear - he ached and longed to hold Jin Ling in his arms, cradle his small body and lull him to sleep, watch his peaceful face at least once to see whether he got the kind eyes of his mother or the sharp facial features of his father, a chance he never got in his previous life. But it also meant his destiny was getting closer and closer, and he was genuinely afraid.

Four months into the pregnancy, in the first half of June - when Lotus Pier's temperature was still moderate, the weather warm but not enough to bother the soon-to-be mother -, Yanli came to visit Lotus Pier with Jin Zixuan.

After hugging her daughter whom she'd missed dearly, Yu Ziyuan gently reprimanded her she should be resting instead of travelling, looking seriously concerned for her health although she was obviously happy to see her. But the woman insisted she wanted to see her family and home once more since she wouldn't have the chance to once she'll give birth, and that the weather in Karp Tower didn't compensate much with her heated skin.



When his sister and brother secretly asked Wei Wuxian for a birth name, he had answered without hesitation and with a deep longing in his heart for the man he was missing, while trying to picture in his mind the baby he had never gotten the chance to see with his own eyes - Jin Rulan, his no-doubt beautiful nephew.

The married couple would be staying in Lotus Pier for several days, doing nothing but enjoy each other's company and Yanli's home and family - and in no way had her brothers missed the heart-shaped eyes Jin Zixuan looked over her with, face swollen with fondness and cautiousness as he accompanied his wife in every step she took, fussing over her until she would giggle and pull him away with that softness only she possessed.

More than once throughout their conversations, Yanli would squeak in her seat, mull over something for a few seconds and then return bright, beaming eyes toward her husband and brothers.

"They are moving!" she would exclaim during those moments, eyes swelling with relief and happiness, and Wei Wuxian's chest constricted every time, Jiang Cheng's eyes growing soft.

When it happened, she would chuckle at their endearing behaviour and then ask them to sit in front of her, each on one side, grabbing their hands with her much smaller ones to place them against the swell of her womb.

The first time she did so, the two brothers had unanimously retreated their hands, faces bright red and voices stuttering, amusing even her husband.

"Sh-Shijie."

Wei Wuxian was rightfully embarrassed, taking a glimpse behind his shoulders to Jin Zixuan, as though evaluating his reaction to their closeness, before he tried to hide his nervousness and force down the flush. Jiang Cheng was not doing any better.

"Oh, come on! Give me your hands before they stop moving!" she laughed kindly, rushing to take their hands again and place their open palms against the spot where she could most feel the kicks of her growing child. Within seconds, they felt something push against their hands and they let out puffs of surprise.

"They are strong." Jiang Cheng ushered, smiling at his sister.

Wei Wuxian quickly agreed, happiness overlapping his previous nervousness. "Yeah, he really is the son of cultivators!"

At such specific phrasing, the general attention of the room turned to him, confusion naked on their faces. Jiang Cheng's looked more like a frown. "*He?*"

"A'Xian, how are you so sure it is a boy?" Yanli asked, amused yet genuinely curious. Wei Wuxian looked at her when he smiled brightly and simply replied that 'he just bet it was a boy'. She agreed with him by feeling, and although this surprised Jin Zixuan - who was very excited to confer his title of heir to his *first* child -, he trusted their judgement.

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Late in the night, since it was the couple's last day in Lotus Pier, they had planned to have dinner together in the main hall. With this goal in mind, Yanli entered Jiang Cheng's bedroom after a gente knock and peered in, surprised to see him still working at such late hour.

"A'jie? Do you need anything?" no matter how busy he was, his attention snapped up as soon as he recognized the voice and gentle footsteps of his sister, dropping reports right away to focus on her and reach out, fussing in a manner that drew a few short giggles from her.

"I was just going to say that dinner is almost ready." she informed him, watching the worry vanish from his face as he relaxed and nodded. "A'Xuan is handling the cooks for me." she also added, chuckling at the picture in her mind.

Her words drew a confused look on her younger brother's face. "He is? Does he even know what a kitchen is?" he demanded, amused.

Yanli smiled back. "Not until I taught him." Jiang Cheng snorted and laughed, pulling Yanli along with him for a solid minute before a question married her forehead and she huffed, holding onto her aching womb.

"By the way, have you seen A'Xian?" she asked, "I couldn't find him anywhere on my way here."

"He's probably with the Wen, or Wei, or whatever." Jiang Cheng answered with a snort, turning around and heading back toward his table to check on the amount of papers he still had to finish, sighing loudly with exhaustion at the endless pile.

In a matter of seconds, Yanli slid swiftly at his side, her hand grazing his arm and preventing him from taking any more reports. "You've been working non stop. Take a break."

"I'm supposed to finish these within the night." Jiang Cheng stated wearily, but Yanli insisted and got him to leave the papers alone, saying that their parents and Jin Zixuan were waiting for them to have dinner together. Unfortunately - but not really - neither him or Wei Wuxian ever had the ability to deny her anything.

So, making sure Yanli was up to it - she was already showing, after all, just round enough, and Jiang Cheng was overly cautious with her, stretching a helping arm from time to time - they slipped deep within Lotus Pier and then crossed an hidden path through the forest that led to a small, secret village not everyone knew of - for now, at least, it was better to keep it like this. But the sight they were presented with upon their arrival made them halt on their steps.

The elders were all digging on the soil to start planting vegetables and such, tools scattered all around and food gathered neatly on large baskets, but at the center of the field stood Wei Wuxian with a very young, familiar child.

“A’Yuan, don’t move. If I plant you on the ground and give you water, you’ll grow as tall as these carrots!” he was saying, using his silly voice while gently tucking dirt on each side of the kid sitting on a ditch.

“A’Yuan wants to grow tall fast!” the kid beamed, wagging his tiny hands in the air, seemingly excited.

“Then don’t move!”

The kid kept laughing and trashing around though, making it very hard for Wei Wuxian to bury him under the dirt, but he couldn’t scold him any longer, infinitely happy to see that child smile so unrestrained once again - as he should. At one point though, after the child was dug out of his hole, he wrapped his tiny arms around Wei Wuxian’s leg and looked at him with glimmering eyes.

“Xian-gege, Xian-gege! I’m hungry!”

“Shall we go eat then?” Yanli said fondly, finally emerging from the shadow with Jiang Cheng in tow. At the sight of them, everyone dropped work tools and halted their activity to greet them properly, bowing mid-height but being quickly dismissed by the Clan Leader.

“A’Yuan wants to eat with Xian-gege!”

Wei Wuxian was about to scold him and tell him not to be demanding and greedy, but Yanli cut him off, suggesting he brought him along since the Yunmeng cooks were making dinner.

“But he’s all dirty!”

“Yeah, and whose fault is that?” Jiang Cheng jabbed, adamant to make him feel frustrated.

He cleared his throat, looking side to side. “You... saw?”

Yanli hid a chuckle behind her hand, watching him with warm eyes. “You are adorable with children, A’Xian.”

Wei Wuxian grew frustrated, suddenly making excuses about not letting Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu wait too much, but both brother and sister saw his face grow red.

The cute rumble of hunger coming from A’Yuan’s tiny little stomach drew the teasing to an end as the three brothers exchanged fond smiles.

“Let’s go eat, A’Yuan!” Wei Wuxian said, but the small child, though happy, didn’t budge. He lifted his chin and unwrapped his arms from his calf, putting on a pouty face and making grabby hands in his direction to signal he wanted to be picked up.

Wei Wuxian sighed loudly and ignored Jiang Cheng’s bickering as he picked up the child.

When A'Yuan was bathed and wrapped in nicer clothes than he ever was - the red and black attire making him resemble a younger Wei Ying - they finally went to the main hall to eat. Once they were before the Clan's hall where they usually gather to eat, A'Yuan is put down and told to walk on his own feet to make a good impression.

"Finally, I thought we decided to eat half a candlemark ago." Madam Yu said with disapproval, but she did not sound as harsh and severe about it as she looked.

"I'm sorry Mother, we had to take care of our new guest." Yanli answered politely, bowing as much as she could and watching Zixuan come over to help her to her seat before she eyed the little child that was now clinging to Wei Wuxian's leg, his head peering out shily.

"Who might this little kid be?" Jiang Fengmian asked, his smile widening tenderly at the sight of such small infant.

Wei Wuxian tilted his head back to look straight at A'Yuan and crossed his arms at his chest, the softness unaltered even when a hint of subdued annoyance filtered through the pointed tone of his voice. "Uncle Jiang asked you a question, A'Yuan."

The kid looked back at the man in purple sitting across the hall. "I—I'm Wei Yuan."

The way he shied away from strangers yet spoke his new surname with such confidence sent warmth spreading across Wuxian's chest and settling in the pit of his stomach.

*Wei Yuan.*

"A'Yuan, why did you come here?"

A'Yuan looked up at Wei Wuxian as though waiting for approval before he spoke.

"C-Can A'Yuan eat here too?" the child asked with a pouty voice, bashful and quite restrained before so many unknown people, and before Madam Yu could scowl him and berate about rules, education and such, Uncle Jiang accorded him permission. Giggling happily, A'Yuan claimed the spot next to Wei Wuxian's seat and filled the hall with a tender laugh that could make every frozen heart melt.

"A'Yuan, don't be impolite. Say thank you to Uncle Jiang." Wei Wuxian scolded him as he claimed the place meant for himself, scouting closer to the edge to make room for him. The baby nodded and leaped on his feet again, bowing politely but with too much enthusiasm toward Jiang Fengmian.

Then, face twisting in embarrassment and a hint of fear, he rushed back to Wei Wuxian, cluthing tightly at his arm and standing as close to him as he could. Sharing a fond smile, they fell into silence as they started eating.

## Chapter 5

### Chapter Summary

"Wei Wuxian woke up with a hard feeling upsetting his gut, nausea stuffed his throat. The tautness which seemed to permeate every ounce of air he breathed that morning made him long for the safety of Lan Wangji's arms."

Sharing the delightful amount of undisturbed quality time they did, both siblings' eyes became accustomed and warmed up to the sight of their brother spending a generous amount of time with the family of Wei living behind the forest in the further end of Lotus Pier— and specifically with Wei Qing, Wei Ning, and young Wei Yuan.

The genuine, brotherly bond he built with the former two hadn't surprised either, both parts putting down on the table layers and layers of eternal gratitude, making it so easy for their relationship to grow and root more deeply— not a temporary and half-strained fellowship which lasted for as long as they were in each other's presence, or a cold and anonymous idolatry, but lasting scar tissue in their hearts.

After all, blood kinship might be the tie that binds, but that which persists through space and time ought to be ticker than blood.

At this point, nothing stopped either part from officially addressing one another as sister and brothers now that the final, thick barrier of decorousness was dismantled by the former Wen's adoption of the 'Wei' surname (only upon insistence and fumbling apologies did Wei Ning finally drop formalities with Wei Wuxian and started referring to him as 'Wei-xiong').

On the other end, it was quite astonishing to see Wei Wuxian share the same bone-deep level of closeness and kinship with the young, parentless child of the Wen remnants, Wei Yuan. They often joked around about it and Jiang Cheng made special fun of him being an early dad, but it actually struck an idea in their brain that was later brought up during a conversation.

In this occasion, Jin Zixuan was gathering the belonging they had stowed in the room they occupied during their stay - Yanli's former one - while his wife sat on their bed to rest her aching back and legs. While Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng lingered outside the door, Wei Yuan did not. Their attention was seized by the child who spoke excitedly to their sister, studying with wide eyes of stupor and childish curiosity her noticeable bump.

Wei Wuxian always wore an adoring look when he looked upon the child, with the affection and softness of a parent, not devoid of nostalgia and longing— a look that often surfaced when he got distracted, letting his emotions pass through his meticulously built wall of false pretenses and counterfeit indifference.

“If you like this kid so much,” Jiang Cheng had started off at one point, nodding off toward Wei Yuan who was being heavily scrutinized by none other than Wei Wuxian, “why not adopt him since he’s parentless?”

What Jiang Cheng threw out there was certainly, probably, arguably, spat out on the moment and offered to his brother as an harmless joke, given his exaggeratedly serious, unhumorous and mocking nature. Wei Wuxian opened his mouth to reply to his comment - perhaps with the same amount of playfulness - but he cut himself off with a sudden thought, his expression softened all of a sudden.

“I’ve... actually never considered it.” he admitted, eyes locked on the child still cuddling against Yanli’s legs, his lips wide and his eyes shining as he started excitedly at her bip bump, respectfully asking for permission to touch.

“He looks just like you in black.” he pinpointed, arms crossed to his chest. “Moreover, he has already taken on your surname... and if he keeps following you around all the time, people’s gonna assume you are related to him and maybe speculate about his birth.” and he won’t be able to stand it if people will accuse him of cheating on his beloved Lan Zhan when the news of the two dating will go out. “Why not make it official?”

“It... It’s not *that* simple.” his layered tone edged to a sigh, a disconcerted look taking place on his face. “As tense as the situation is, I’m afraid people might pick on him for being so close to me, if just for spite. Moreover, I should ask permission from his elders and then—” He paused.

At his hesitation, his brother’s lips twisted upward, teasing. “Ask Hanguang-Jun to play the dad?”

A blush crept up his neck.

“Jiang Cheng!”

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A few weeks before Yanli’s due date, a disciple of the golden Carp Tower came to Lotus Pier to personally deliver a formal invitation from the Jin Clan in which Madam Jin welcomed Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan to reside in Lanling for the following months, so they could visit their in-laws, old friends of them, and meanwhile be present for the arrival of their first grandchild.

Of course, leaving now meant entrusting Jiang Cheng to carry out his role of Clan Leader of Yunmeng Jiang and the duties that came with it on his own, but the couple was confident their son could handle the pressure, having proven himself and his headstrong personality more than once. Thus, they announced their departure to Lanling for three months with a light heart.

When this decision was taken, Wei Wuxian kept his thoughts for himself, even though he was suspicious of how sudden and unexpected the invitation was, sensing the presence of ulterior motives and underlying scheming of unsubtle people behind it. In his two lives, he has never trusted the Jin one bit and wouldn't start now (the knowledge of Jin Zixuan's profound devotion toward his sister helped a lot to quell his growing anxiety, he now knew the man would do anything to keep her safe and happy, but she was in a place so far away, so far from home, where he could not protect her even if he wanted to).

When Madam Yu and Jiang Fengmian left, from that moment onwards and with the passing of days, time went by slowly... *leisurely* and *insanely* so.

Ever since, a dreadful state of quietness and equanimity had befallen over Lotus Pier.

While this pleased the youngers, who despite their dedication took advantage of Madam Yu's absence to judiciously cut short their everyday training, but to Wei Wuxian, the air was taut with tension, living through with apprehension.

Two weeks after their last meeting, Wei Wuxian received from Wangji a letter which warned him that the visit to Lotus Pier scheduled for that month was unfortunately to be postponed due to serious Clan affairs he had to attend to— matters he could not circumvent, even though his choice of words alone elucidated to Wei Wuxian his adversity and disapproval for being denied to see him.

That day in particular was extremely chill, tense, and desert. With fiery gusts of wind banging decidedly and unconstrained against every surface, as though the weather reacted to the heavy tension, perceiving the storm brewing over the horizon.

Wei Wuxian woke up with a hard feeling upsetting his gut, nausea stuffed his throat. The tautness which seemed to permeate every ounce of air he breathed that morning made him long for the safety of Lan Wangji's arms.

Wei Wuxian was not one to care for such feelings or take a scare, but he still asked Jiang Cheng if he wasn't the only one sensing something disturbing, should he have missed anything unusual going on in the Clan.

"*Feel*, you say?" Jiang Cheng simply snorted at him and croked his brow. He shut for a few silent breaths, focusing on his surrounding to look for what that might have unsettled Wei Wuxian as if believing anything could reach his ears from his seat, but coming out empty-handed. "There is nothing. Aren't you being too mushy now?"

At his words, Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes in a silent mock. "All right, I'll go find A'Yuan and the others."

Before he left, he was almost sure he heard him mutter something close to 'as always', which actually aroused a fresh smile on his lips.

He thought that maybe it was the right moment to ask A'Yuan's seniors and relatives permission for adoption, and then confront the child directly. He still had to ask Lan Wangji's opinion on that, though maybe it was still too soon in their relationship to speak about children.

Would A'Yuan even want to leave his family behind and come wherever they wanted to? Would he have fun in a place like Gusu, if that's where life will take them? Would someone like him even be allowed there?

As he walked across Lotus Pier, which had been cast in a dull and lethargic atmosphere, grey clouds stretching far across the sky and looming threateningly above its ground, he felt very unsettled. Somehow, both his surrounding and the spiral of silence he fell upon drew him to certain thoughts, some of which he had tried to overpower by keeping himself busy, or in company.

But now, as he headed to where the Wei resided, he felt a tug at his soul, as though he had overlooked something.

In reality, there were tons of things he should be analysing and planning for what he knew was to come, bearing in mind that anything could change now that the future had been slightly altered. The war had concluded, but many lives were spared; Wei Ning and his family were safe, safer than they were before, for they had Jiang Cheng and Yunmeng Jiang to latch on should something happen to him.

Now, a few months from here, so many things would happen, so many would go wrong.

Every since acknowledging his time travelling, he had inevitably put the survival of Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli as his first concern and main interest, them being the people he was the most indebted to and most deserving of an happy ending— Jiang Cheng was a close second just because he had not, at least, lost his life at the end. Wei Wuxian's greatest goal was to make it so Jin Ling won't have to suffer being parentless so soon after birth.

But there were so many unsolved things he had no clue how to resolve, for example the Hundred Holes Curse cast upon Jin Zixun by someone he had yet to identify, or the matter at Qionghi Path... As well as how to destroy the other half of the Tiger Tally without causing that same disruption or without setting off the shards of the other half, which still had to be thoroughly cleansed.

Good thing was that he saved Wei Ning from becoming a conscious body and from living the life of a brainless puppet condemned to live among shed blood and to be responsible for a life as heavy as Jin Zixuan's.

At least, he had this.

These were all things he would have to consider carefully, but he had plenty of space to figure things out; moreover, this time he was not alone. He would speak with Lan Zhan, tell him the truth the way he did with the Jiang family, and plan out their next actions.



When he thought so, the forest that surrounded the Wei's grounds finally came into view. He quickly reached the first branches and barely jumped on a lump of roots, when out of the blue, so sudden and loud his stomach churned in fear, the air filled with a scream that made the hair in the back of his neck stand out and his nerves quiver.

Without a second thought, he sped off to the general direction of the noise, but became frantic when he tracked it back to its source, which happened to be the field where the Wen remnants lived.

The air was suddenly oppressively heavy. Long, unnerving seconds of silence later, basking in his thoughts with many unanswered questions, he bumped on Wei Qing. She was rushing over with a distraught look looming on her face.

“W-Wuxian!”

He was startled by the inconsistent look of sheer panic on her pale face, something that didn't quite belong to a person like Wen Qing who always looked unbothered and quiet despite her arrogance and sturdy personality.

The woman took a quick intake of breath to steady her voice while barely holding herself up, enfeebled.

“Someone— Someone took A'Yuan! He— The *man* ordered everyone to stay away, he's asking for *you*!”

He paused for a moment, hit by puzzlement which slowly became awareness before rage began to burn hot inside of him, increasing proportionally to the resentful darkness swirling just under his skin. His anger used like a ruse so that it could flourish when he was least expected to protect himself from its assault, resulting in uncontrolled rage that set ablaze between the ribs of his cage and painted his eyes a scarlet red, like blood rushing up. The same troubling look he had used for years like a mask, a facade to hide behind of, had now re-claimed the spot on his face— but not even the resentment messing around with his body and making his blood rush in the worst places could subdue the fear pricking underneath his skin and setting his nerves on fire.

“Do as told, make sure *no one* stays remotely close.” he instructed, ignoring her attempt to talk things through with him before he dashed off on his own.

When he finally reached said someone, the male had a cloth wrapped around the lower section of his face to hide his identity, while wearing a blank blue uniform to give nothing away and hide his Clan of origin, if he belonged in one. But most importantly, what alerted Wei Wuxian the most, was to actually see Wei Yuan hang from his arm while relentlessly trashing around in the hope of being freed by his kidnapper. In the other arm, the stranger held a blade pointed against his neck.

Wei Wuxian was beginning to feel the resentful energy swirl viciously inside his body, his consciousness evading from that state of mind he had not without fatigue and sacrifices built

alongside Lan Wangj day and night to tap into whenever chaos arose, so as not to lose control again and have a better grasp of reality than he ever did in his first time, where secrecy and madness forced him to refuse help.

But right now... right now he felt the cruelest, burning murderous intention pulse with vigour, overlapping reason, mercilessly breaking through his control.

“Wei Wuxian, we finally meet.” the sly grin that adorned his face was evil. “It seems you have something a friend of mine is looking for. Casually, so do I.” he looked down at Wei Yuan, pointing the screaming child in his grip, Wei Wuxian intertwining his eyes with repulsion. “So, as long as you satisfy my request, this child shall be safe and sound.”

Despite feeling like a ticking bomb the louder the cries got, blood leaking there where nails cut through pale skin, he didn't let the stranger look down on him.

“Are you looking for the missing piece of Yin Metal?” he questioned. “Because waste no time, it is not here.”

He scoffed. “You are still fooling around, aren't you? You think I don't know what your Yin Tiger Tally actually is?”

Wishing not to waste time explaining the truth to deaf ears, Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes. “I keep repeating the same thing over and over, but no one seems to understand. The fourth piece of Yin Metal is not in my hands, but... I should not concern myself with this. I'm pretty sure your master knew that when he sent you here to recover the Tally, or maybe he had it all along.” he snickered humourlessly, reading right through him without him needing say anything. “I knew there was a reason if Clan Leader Jin invited the whole Jiang family to Carp Tower. He wanted them out of the way.”

Even catching him off guard with his deductions and suspects did little to quell the feeling of dread pulsing along his meridians and veins, the gap in his performance bringing him no satisfaction.

The look soon abandoned his face, lips split with a mischevious grin. “How clever.” he stated, dropping his eyes to the prey he held below, tightening his hold on both the child and the sword pointed at his neck, making him cry harder. “But being smart has always been one of your greatest flaw, and it's going to get you *killed*.”

His intention was clear, he was probably asked to do whatever he could to get rid of Wei Wuxian beside stealing the Seal. At this point, Wei Wuxian couldn't risk playing around anymore, not while Wei Yuan was held hostage. “Leave him be! What you are looking for is *not* here.”

“Now now, you think I came here unprepared? Of course I did my homeworks. I know you can evoke the Yin Tiger Tally from whatever it is hid, you wouldn't have taken the risk.” he admitted confidently, and Wei Wuxian - having figured out who was behind all of this, because this man sure as *hell* couldn't be - was not that surprised to learn he was also told this upon going to retrieve the Seal.

Still, the child in his arm wailed and trashed around, calling out for his Xian-gege and fighting the strong grasp which holds him prisoner. It was, beside fear, the only thing that fought the anger threatening to take over Wei Wuxian.

“Wei Wuxian, do not *force* me...” he didn’t finish, but the blade snapped closer to A’Yuan’s neck as a threat, making him see red.

“Don’t you fucking *dare*!” he shouted, taking one step forward but daring not to walk further, fearing the limit this mad man would push to even when dealing with a small child. But his deceiving attempts worked not, nor did his threats— not that he expected it to. The man knew that he wouldn’t risk his life, for no matter what he could attempt to rescue him, the blade to his neck was closer, and would strike faster.

“Wei Wuxian, mind your actions. Otherwise, you will have this kid’s life on your conscience!” he groaned threateningly, shaking the kid hurriedly. “Hurry! Call the Yin Tiger Tally!”

Sniffing out no other solution that would also ensure Wei Yuan’s safety, Wei Wuxian had no other choice if not comply with his wish, which meant evoking the Yin Tiger Tally.

“Okay, fine.”

He smiled victoriously. “Good. And no funny jokes.”

Wei Wuxian nodded; he was but tense muscles, so on-edge he could feel the joints between his bones rattling in their sockets as he shivered, the resentment surging up and tainting his anger with its cold, freezing darkness.

Stretching his arm outward, he connected his mind to the evil piece of metal and called upon it. In truth, what he and Lan Wangji had accomplished, a few weeks ago, with the other half of the Seal was cleansing a good part of it and sealing it away, setting an array to conceal its presence from wondering strangers, however unusual that place was to visit; it was somewhere close enough he could call upon it if needed - they couldn’t travel to the opposite end of the continent, after all - but also deserted of living beings. The array slowed down its capacity to attract and conjure resentment into itself, so that both of them could exploit this time to recover their energy and spirit.

Mostly, Lan Wangji’s insecurities and concern pertained Wei Wuxian— he was more susceptible to resentment than Wangji could ever be while protected by his golden core, and he worried that two consecutives backlash could cause serious, permanent damage on his unarguably weaker body, or even lead to *qi* deviation. Reasons alike were the root to set a one-year time limit to deal with it, with the additional rule to wait a few months at minimum to allow Wei Wuxian a complete recovery and to reinstate balance in his meridians.

But now, forced by circumstances not only to destroy the second shard of the Yin Tiger Tally on his own to avoid it falling in evil hands who could wreck the world and cause the same damage it once did, but also skipping the essential phase of throughout cleansing it... Stretching his limit far and beyond his physical abilities, it would be a miracle if Wei Wuxian

could come unscathed from yet another spiritual backlash, much more violent than the earlier one.

Wei Yuan was crying loudly, he could feel the desperation clinging to every cell in his body, but he knew he could not afford any distraction thoughtout such a delicate course of actions. He shut out everything around him and outside of his mind.

He felt blood spill from his nose, eyes and mouth, but he did not waver until he heard the cracking sound of metal as the Yin Tiger Tally was reduced into dust, and knew it was worth the pain that had struck his body and spirit. As soon as the resentful energy stopped flowing around him so mindlessly, Wei Wuxian vomited a rich amount of blood, the red liquide spraying all over him and the floor, awakening something inside of him that had laid dormant until now, the voices growing louder and louder until the blackness sharpened and became so dense he could lose himself in it.

Before he knew it, his head collided with the ground, and then, as the last warm light vanished from his eyesight, black was all he could grasp.

Such a ruckus was bound to catch people's attention: the wave of resentment the Yin Metal had released had been so strong to attract anyone who was at least close to Yunmeng, even miles away from where all had happened. Lan Wangji had just reached the city and was somewhat close to Lotus Pier when he felt it, dread pouring in his gut like cool water.

When he rushed in on Bichen, the scene carrying out before his perplexed, alerted eyes resembled one of a tragedy - a stranger man venting his anger with hateful screams as pain coursed through him, dark smoke swallowing his body in a way that was entirely different from the shield of dense, resentful energy which surrounded A'Yuan, preventing him from suffering the same damage the other had suffered.

Behind him, he caught Jiang Cheng's distraught gasp before the Clan Leader ordered his disciples to take a hold of the man doubling over in pain. But, despite A'Yuan's loud wails, his incessant crying and shouting, Lan Wangji's attention drifted to the bloody corpse laying sideway on the ground, completely unmoving.

Though their face was concealed, Lan Wangji did not need to question his counscious about the nature of those long, ebony hair and the red ribbon that peered out of them, or the dark themed robes, now torn and ripped apart. Neither did he need to listen to the loud shouts that Wei Yuan let out as he was freed, resentful energy peeling off of him.

“Xian-gege!”

He had long figured out what had happened, and did not fail to recognize the signs of what he had once been a witnesser of: the whole earth had quievered and the air was still drenched with heavy resentful energy, not to comment on the piece of Yin Metal shattered into smaller, still shaped pieces. When Wei Wuxian had suffered from a backlash due to the destruction of an half of the Yin Tiger Tally, Wangji had been there, and through his help had diminished the damage.

But now?

He was caught unprepared by a dazzling wave of dreadful bile.

“Wei Ying!” he rushed to him, catching the attention of anyone present. He dropped uncerimoniously to the ground, knees buckling at the pull of despair as his arms, so strong yet so gentle, lifted the bloody mess of a body Wei Wuxian’s had become.

From his eyes, ears and mouth flowed a stream of red, a copious amount of blood leaking and staining his clothes, as well as the ground beneath his head, and his face was sickly pale. But were it all, Lan Wangji would have not felt so upset.

He did not even need to focus himself and his spiritual energy on Wei Wuxian to perceive the range of the damage his body had suffered: the resentment that had nestled inside of him in place of his long-lost golden core was now completely off, seeping into every bone and tissue of his, clinging to every functioning cell he had, sliding through the walls of his veins and pulsing within him, sealing his mind and shutting his thoughts.

He could literally feel Wei Wuxian slowly fade away, chased by the energy running amok inside of him. The usually lively and dazzling boy remained still and motionless and it's *wrong, so very wrong.*

His eyes snapped and his breath caught as he staggered to take his wrist and check on his pulse, wavering and stalling there for endless seconds before he heard the response of his weak heart. Without wasting any more time, he laid his hand on his forehead and pumped spiritual energy through his body, grimacing at the violent response he obtained.

“Hanguang-jun? How is—” Jiang Cheng began to ask, but as soon as he took in the pitiful sight, his breath itched, and his eyes flinched to cover the eyes of the child he had picked up, pushing his head in the crook of his neck. Catching on, he quickly shut to his disciples. “Bring Wei Qing here! Hurry!”

Lan Wangji was shaking head to toe, but he would not dare interrupting what he was doing in fear of losing grasp of what little he could feel of Wei Wuxian, what had not been plunged in the raw depth of his body by the untamed resentment.

*Please Wei Ying, hold on.*

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